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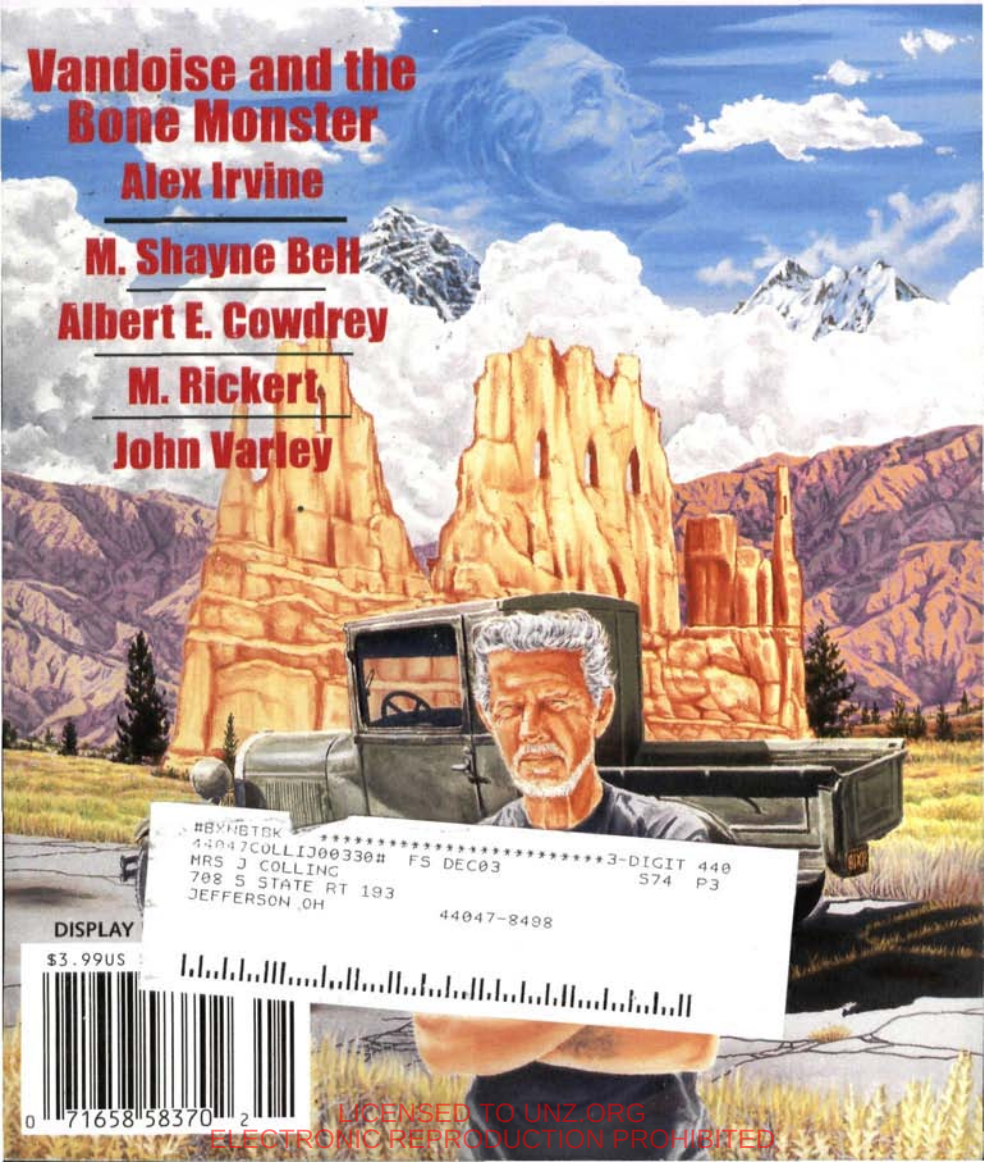


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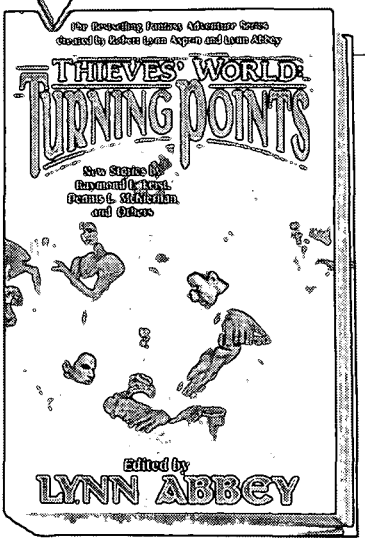


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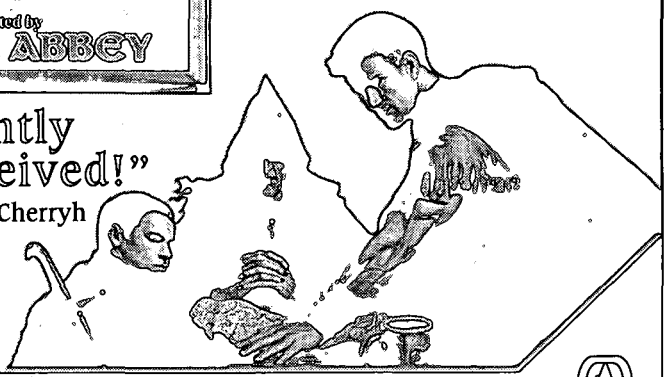

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THE MAGAZINE OF
# Fantasy & Science Fiction
January ◦ 54th Year of Publication

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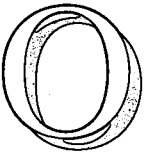
*M. Shayne Bell is the author of one novel,* Nicoji, *and more than three dozen stories, seventeen of which are collected in* How We Play the Game in Salt Lake and Other Stories. *An inveterate world traveler, he hopes to be on a hiking expedition across the calderas of Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean when this issue hits the stands.*

*His new tale is set in his hometown of Salt Lake City and doesn't include much travel, since the narrator is stuck in a hospital. Ultimately, however, the story reaches far beyond the end of the patient's bed—*

# Anomalous Structures of My Dreams

## By M. Shayne Bell



F COURSE IT WASN'T A private room. Medicare doesn't pay for that. Never mind that next door was an empty room with two beds never slept in. I had to share a room. Never mind that when you're sick enough to be hospitalized, the last thing you want is for a perfect stranger and usually the stranger's family and friends to watch you be that sick. It was cheaper to keep two people in one room, end of discussion, throw up if you have to and let a roomful of strangers watch you do it.

I was admitted late in the day. The man in the bed next to mine lay there breathing raspily, watching them move me in. He never said a word. His frail little wife and, I assumed, daughter stood up to make room for the nurses and me. I nodded at my roommate, but that was all — what do you say when nurses are helping you into one of those ridiculously high hospital beds, putting a needle into the back of your wrist to start an IV drip, and injecting you with antibiotics?

"Can I get you anything?" one of the nurses asked me when she was through with her part in the little drama.

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Yes, I thought, get me out of here. Get me well and get me out of here.

When my roommate's visitors were gone and it was late and all the TVs were off, the two of us in that room still lay awake. He'd cough, trying not to make a lot of noise, then I'd do the same.

"What are you in for?" he asked me suddenly through the curtain separating our beds. His question made it sound as if we were criminals about to discuss our crimes.

"Pneumonia," I said. "Noninfectious." I did not go on to say that it was PCP pneumonia and that this AIDS-related opportunistic infection would kill me if my doctor didn't find a way to kill it first. I did not have an immune system left to fight it with.

"I've got pneumonia, too," he said, wheezing. He coughed hard.

No way! I thought. They'd put me in a room with somebody coughing up yet another strain of lung killer I couldn't fight? "What kind?" I asked.

"They don't know," he said. "Something rare."

In the night, when he was sleeping, I unhooked myself from the IV and oxygen feed and walked out to the nurses' desk, hospital gown tied shut and held shut as well. I asked the head nurse about the condition of the man in the bed next to mine. I figured I had a right to know.

"It's not to worry," she said. "Mr. Schumberg can't possibly be infectious. He should be getting better soon."

"But if he has something different from me and I catch it — I can't fight it. I could be in serious trouble."

"Your physician approved your room assignment. You can talk to her about it in the morning, but I'm sure you'll be fine."

It was all she would say. Patient confidentiality rules forbade her from telling me anything specific about my roommate. I walked back to my bed and saw that the man next to me had an IV pentamadine drip just like mine. That fit serious pneumonia treatment. I wondered what strain he had.

Even I could see that by morning my roommate was not getting better. He was noticeably worse. All he could do was cough. Our nurse started his

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pentamadine drip, then she started mine. I felt the cold drug course through my veins and around to my heart and brain. I did not understand why the nurses couldn't warm the drug first, why they couldn't at least let it sit on a counter and come to room temperature. They always took it straight from the refrigerator and started it icy cold into my veins. I had asked them to warm it the last time I'd been admitted, but no one wanted special requests to remember or a patient fussing with hospital procedures. I didn't say anything this time. I just gathered up the blankets around me.

When the nurse left, my roommate turned on a football game rebroadcast on one of the sports channels, then he completely ignored it. He called his wife and asked her why she wasn't here yet. I found myself wishing that I had someone to wait for, someone who could walk through the door at any moment and bring flowers or a newspaper and gossip about friends. I'd been too sick for too long to keep up many friendships. My closest current relationships were with my doctor and the staffs at the pharmacy and the food bank. My little sister lived in Minneapolis and she might call, I thought. If I let her know I was in here, she might call.

His wife arrived before any of our doctors made rounds. I heard her kiss her husband, and they murmured a few words. Then she stepped around the curtain and smiled a little nervously at me. She carried a small bouquet of lilacs arranged in a dill pickle bottle she had washed the label off. She set it on my dresser.

"Thank you so much," I said, and the tears set in. AIDS was making my brain shrink, among other things, but the only effect I'd been able to notice so far besides the headaches was the constant crying. I could not control my emotions. I'd cry if I ran out of shampoo or if the electric bill arrived one day earlier than usual. I couldn't help it. I sat there with tears in my eyes over this lady's unexpected kindness, and I did not dare blink for fear the tears would run down my cheeks and she'd see.

"I hope you're well soon," she said, and she patted my knee and stepped back around the curtain to be with her husband.

I leaned back and wiped my eyes. I inhaled the fragrance of the lilacs mixed, oddly, with the lingering smell of dill which you can never quite wash out of a jar. I hadn't been able to ask her name, and she had not asked mine.

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* * *

My doctor made quick rounds. She prescribed a higher dose of Tylenol to bring down my fever, then she was off to her clinic. The resident interns on the floor made their rounds. About an hour later, Mr. Schumberg's doctors arrived, three of them. We were in a teaching hospital so it was not unusual to see teams in a room — but these were all doctors. There were no interns among them as far as I could tell. They turned off his TV and pulled the curtain completely around his bed. I lay back and closed my eyes.

I couldn't help but overhear everything. After a while, I realized they weren't asking him regular questions. It was all about his work, not his condition.

"I was in the research and development end," he said. "Masked and gloved and in a damned hot bodysuit."

"You couldn't have breathed them in?"

"Through the biohazard glass and the steel shield between them and me? Through my suit? I don't think so." He stopped and coughed and coughed. "It wouldn't have hurt me if I had," he continued when he could talk again.

"My husband is always very careful," his wife volunteered.

"He's not responding to treatment, and we're trying to determine whether something we've overlooked could be the reason why," one of the doctors said.

"How did you work with them?" another asked.

"You suit up before you enter the research area, then you fit your hands into white, pressure-sensitive gloves that control the movement of robotic arms in a hermetically sealed room you never enter. Those robots do all the actual work for you. You strap on goggles that let you see what you're doing. You never come into physical contact with the projects."

He coughed again and again.

"Could you lean forward, please?"

They talked on like that while they listened to his lungs. I was too fevered and chilled from the cold IV to pay them much attention then.

They took sputum samples from both of us. They came back for another from him at noon, then another from him at four o'clock. They

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took him away in a wheelchair to x-ray his lungs. His daughter Ann came to sit with him in the evening and to spell her mother. Ann kept going to the sink to freshen cool washcloths that she put on her father's forehead.

My fever spiked again in the evening, despite the increased Tylenol. I'd been trying to drink liquids all day on top of the saline drip to do what I could to help my body fight the pneumonia, but it wasn't conquered yet. I'm impatient when I'm sick. I want whatever it is — cold, flu, PCP pneumonia — to be over now. Progress always seems slow. But it's especially troublesome when all you have to do is lie in bed while your doctor and teams of nurses concentrate on your condition. It's impossible not to focus on it yourself. All your little aches and pains seem magnified. You watch yourself for the slightest signs of improvement. If there aren't any, you wonder why. You wonder what's happening. You start worrying about what you've left undone and unsaid. Living with AIDS as long as I have, you'd think I'd have said it all and prepared everything long ago. Most people would think that someone like me would have had plenty of warning to get ready, but you never have plenty of warning. There's never enough time. You always need more.

Night came, and all the visitors left and most of the TVs finally went off. Still I could not sleep. Neither could my roommate. We lay there taking turns coughing. His cough seemed much worse. He'd cough and cough, then gasp for air, then cough some more. He did not try to hide it now. He started moaning between coughs.

"Do you need something?" I asked him through the curtain. "Do you want me to call a nurse?"

"I just need to catch my breath," he said. "I'll be all right."

But he could not catch his breath, and his coughing fits lasted longer and longer. His coughing seemed to come from the depths of his lungs. After one long coughing fit, I heard him throwing up.

I hit the "call nurse" button, but no one rushed in. No one came at all. Damn them, I thought. I unhooked my IV, took off my oxygen feed, and got out of bed. I pulled back the curtain, thinking I would at least hand him his plastic vomit bowl, but the sight of him shocked me. His vomit was bloody. It was all over his bed and had splashed onto the floor. He was choking for air.

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I headed out the door. "Mr. Schumberg needs help!" I called to a nurse in the hallway. "He's choking in vomit."

That got attention. She ran into the room, and another nurse soon followed. I sat in a chair in the hallway while they worked on Mr. Schumberg. After a few minutes, his choking stopped, but he kept coughing.

The elevators at the far end of the hall soon opened, and a short Mexican woman stepped out pulling a cleaning cart behind her. They hadn't wasted any time calling housekeeping, I thought. I did not envy this woman's job. She pulled on gloves, and the nurses asked her to mop the floor first so they could walk around in there. After that, she carried clean bedding in and came out with the soiled. She went back in to keep cleaning. I waited until one of the nurses had left before I walked back in.

The smell of disinfectant was strong in the room. They had raised the back of Mr. Schumberg's bed to a 90-degree angle, so he was sitting straight up. A nurse was increasing his oxygen flow. When she left, he sat there with his eyes closed, so I didn't say anything. I was certain he did not feel like talking. I started to climb back into bed, but I saw blood on the floor between our beds. The woman from housekeeping was mopping around the sink. I stepped over to her.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but there's still blood between the beds."

"Ai!" she said. She went out to her cart for a different mop. After she had cleaned up the mess with that mop, she came back in with another mop dripping with disinfectant. She mopped vigorously under both beds.

"Gracias," I said.

She smiled at my Spanish. "Nada," she said.

I got back into bed from the other side. She finished her work, then she pulled off her gloves, threw them in the trash, and washed at the sink. I saw that her nametag read "Maria."

I had the first of the odd, frenetic dreams that night. In it, everyone I knew rushed around carrying rocks and furniture and sandbags to a wall we were tying to construct around the downtown highrises. No one would tell me why we were doing it, just that we had to work faster and faster. All the buildings we were attempting to protect were lit from floor to ceiling, and that's what I remembered most from the dream when I woke

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at 2:00 A.M.: the oddly lit buildings burning gloriously bright while the rest of the city was dark and apparently without electricity.

I pulled the covers up around me. I could feel the fever hot inside me. The ice had melted in my pitcher, but the water was still cool. I poured another glass and drank it. The blinds were pulled over the window so I could not look out at the city lights in the valley, but I was sure they were there. It took a while for me to go back to sleep.

THE INTERNS WERE very worried about the blood in Mr. Schumberg's vomit, and I was certain the doctors would be, too. The head intern sent him for more x-rays before breakfast. When my doctor did her rounds, she ordered a follow-up x-ray of my lungs. When the nurse wheeled me back into the room, Mr. Schumberg was sitting on the side of his bed in conference with the three doctors. His breakfast lay untouched on his table. He had his feet over the side of his bed, and he was trying to sit up straight. He was entangled in IV lines and the oxygen feed to his nose. The doctors pulled the curtains around his bed while the nurse helped me back up into mine.

"There are anomalous structures forming in the lower third of each of your lungs," I heard one of the doctors say to him.

"How do you mean 'anomalous'?" he asked, and then he coughed.

"They are right-angled or curved, not irregular as would be the case with cancer. We have to biopsy the structures to see what they are, then remove them if necessary."

"When?"

"Now. Today. We have the biopsy scheduled for one o'clock. Don't eat breakfast."

They were quiet while Mr. Schumberg signed the consent forms for the biopsy.

"We also need you to sign this form allowing us to contact your employer. If the biopsy confirms our guess, we have to talk to them about what might be forming in your lungs and how best to proceed."

"Lungs are too wet for my projects," Mr. Schumberg said. "Human tissue is too wet. They can't be growing inside me. This is something else — probably a malfunctioning x-ray machine."

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"We're having that checked."

He signed the consent forms, and they left and the nurse left. I did not hear Mr. Schumberg settle back into bed. After a time, I could hear that he was crying. That surprised me. I wondered if this was the most serious diagnosis he had had to face. I remembered crying after they'd told me I was HIV positive all those years ago. I'd managed to wait until I'd made it to my car where I'd been alone. I'd known that nothing in my life would ever be the same. Maybe he was thinking similar thoughts.

Listening to him cry made me teary, but that was just my shrinking brain. I wished that his wife were here to comfort him. I did not feel comfortable trying. Blubbering hospitalized AIDS patients can do a lot of things, but cheer up other patients is usually not one of them.

I wondered what was going on.

His wife came soon enough, but so did officials from his work. They grilled Mr. Schumberg about lapses in procedures I could not make sense of, and he claimed there had been none. His wife said again that "he is always very careful." I started to wonder just how careful he had been or, if he were the careful man his wife claimed, whether his company had set up adequate procedures to protect him in the first place.

One of the doctors came in to ask questions of the company officials. They all studied Mr. Schumberg's lung x-rays. The company officials asked for copies and left quickly. Nurses arrived to take Mr. Schumberg away for the biopsy. His wife walked down to the waiting room, but soon she was back in the chair by his bed.

"Do you mind if I turn on my husband's television?" she asked. "The waiting room is so crowded and all anyone is watching is football. I'll wait here for Bernie."

I told her to go right ahead. She turned on a cooking channel which she completely ignored. She called Ann to tell her about the biopsy and possible surgery, then she leafed through an issue of *Good Housekeeping*. After an hour or so of Northern Italian pastas that I at least watched, she walked back down to the waiting room.

The room was oddly quiet after she left. I turned off the TV, but it was more than that, of course. Being around Mr. Schumberg and his family

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made me think, too much probably, about what my life lacked. Mr. Schumberg had other people in his life. The quiet hospital room would be like my quiet house when I was well enough to drive myself home again. It was time to make some changes, I thought. Time for some improvements. I knew that hospital resolutions were like New Year's resolutions — seldom remembered after discharge. But I'd remember this one. There were people I could call, old friends who'd maybe want to see me again, new friends to make. I'd even leave here with pasta recipes to cook for them.

My chest ached from all the coughing, and I could not stop. They gave me a liquid medicine to control the cough, and it seemed to help for about half an hour. My fever was higher, not lower — 103.5 now, and that in the daytime. I was chilled. I asked a nurse to bring me another blanket to wrap in.

My doctor surprised me by coming back to my room around three o'clock, hours before evening rounds. She pulled on gloves before coming over to me, which she would never normally do.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Sick," I said.

"Lean forward," she said. "I need to listen to your lungs."

I did as she asked, then she percussed my back and chest, asking whether any of the taps hurt. They all did.

She excused herself and walked out to the nurses' desk. I could see her through the doorway. One of Mr. Schumberg's doctors walked over and talked to her. He opened a chart and showed her a series of x-rays. She held an x-ray she was carrying up to the light for him to look at, and he shook his head. The head intern walked over to look. I could see that my doctor was getting angrier by the minute, though I couldn't hear what any of them was saying. A nurse at the desk hurried to hand her a form, and she walked back into my room with the head intern.

"I'm getting you out of this room," she said.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Where do I start? With the health-care system in this country? With free-enterprise capitalism that thinks it can chew up people and spit the ones it damages into hospitals unequipped to handle them?"

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She was filling out a form for the room transfer. I'd never seen my doctor this angry.

"You might have picked up what Mr. Schumberg has," the intern said.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. "But they assured me he was noninfectious," I said pointlessly.

"They told me the same thing," my doctor said. "They used to have an AIDS ward in this hospital. If they'd kept that going, as I'd advised them, we wouldn't have this problem."

"What does Mr. Schumberg have?" I asked.

The intern looked at my doctor.

"That's the million dollar question," my doctor said.

When she was through with the form, she handed it to the intern and walked to the window. She held up an x-ray in the light. "These are of your lungs the day you were admitted," she said. She pointed out the areas affected by the pneumonia. "Now here's your x-ray from this morning. It came to me just half an hour ago."

She held the new one up in the light. There was a small dark rectangle in the lower portion of my right lung.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "But apparently it's not organic."

"What do you mean 'not organic'?"

"It's metal."

"How did it get there?"

"That's what we need to find out. I'm heading down to see what the biopsy discovers in Schumberg's lungs. In the meantime, you're getting your own room and isolation."

She left in a hurry. The intern was leafing through Mr. Schumberg's chart.

"I don't get it," I said. "How do you catch 'metal rectangles' in your lungs?"

The intern shrugged. "We don't know yet. Mr. Schumberg developed symptoms of pneumonia two weeks ago, but all standard treatments failed, first antibiotics at home, then in-hospital treatment. He apparently works for the research arm of a telecommunications company. Yesterday after each successive x-ray showed the anomalies in his lungs changing

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and growing we started wondering if something from his workplace could be causing his condition."

"And you left me in here with him?"

I was furious.

"We weren't putting together all the pieces. Until three hours ago, we still thought there might be something wrong with the x-ray equipment. But the technicians assure us it's functioning perfectly."

I just sat there, stunned, not knowing what to do or expect with a metal rectangle of some kind growing in my left lung.

"You might have a million dollar lawsuit on your hands," the intern said.

He seemed to think that would brighten things up for me.

WHEN YOU CONTRACT a disease like AIDS, you think that that is what is going to kill you. With AIDS, I had any of ten or fifteen opportunistic infections either singly or in combination lurking as my executioners and time to imagine facing them all. You never think that your end will come in some unexpected way like a bus hitting you in a crosswalk. That's what I felt like alone in that room again. I felt as if I were standing in the headlights of a Greyhound bus.

I unhooked myself from the IV and oxygen feed and packed the few things I had brought with me to the hospital so I'd be ready to move to the new room. Then I hooked everything back up and waited. After about twenty minutes, they wheeled Mr. Schumberg into the room. Mrs. Schumberg followed his bed in, and she had tears in her eyes. Mr. Schumberg did not look good. I just looked at all of them, wide-eyed. I knew room transfers could take a while, but I'd expected to be gone when they brought him back. They pulled the curtain while they moved him onto his own bed, but I could hear him wheezing and coughing and moaning. The two nurses who brought him in were coughing, too. Add my coughs, and it was a noisy room.

Ann soon arrived. I was surprised to see her in the daytime since I knew she had a job. She stepped over for a chair from my section of the room. "They're taking Dad into surgery as soon as possible," she told me. "I took the afternoon off to come sit with Mother through this."

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"I'm sorry," I said, "but I hope the surgery helps your dad get well."

It was the least I could say, even under the circumstances. Ann was pulling the chair past the end of my bed. I decided to try to get some answers. "What did your father do?" I asked Ann. "They think I might have picked up what he has."

She stopped and looked at me, then she sat in the chair. "What's happened?" she asked.

I told her about the x-rays of my lungs.

"Dad designs ultrasensitive communications equipment," she said.

"I don't understand," I said. "How could that affect his lungs and now mine?"

"Let's ask him," she said. She stood and pulled back the curtain. She explained the situation to her father. No one said anything for a moment. None of us even coughed for a time.

"I design machines that build — " Mr. Schumberg said, then he started coughing again. "That build themselves from the molecular structure up—nanotech. Our nanomachines carry the plans for communications devices. They process local materials and build our equipment in hours. We wanted them for emergency situations, military patrols. People could carry a telecom center in a matchbox."

I lay back and looked out the window. It was starting to make sense. Nanotechnology and the marvelous machines it would supposedly create had been in the news for years. His nanomachines had somehow escaped from the lab to the wider world — or at least to our lungs. I imagined microscopic nanomachines eager to build radios and handsets coughed out in a fine spray from Schumberg's lungs hour after hour for the days that I had lain next to him.

"What were your machines supposed to grow from?" I asked.

"Dirt or sand. Start the process and my little machines fan out to find what they need in the local environment. Lungs — human tissue — were supposed to be too wet for them to grow in."

"Apparently they weren't," I said.

He looked appalled. So did Ann and his wife.

"How do you turn them off?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. "High-dose radiation would do it. Extreme heat." He looked back at me. "Basically, at this point, you

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don't turn them off. We were still trying to design decent shut-off mechanisms."

Hence his rushed surgery and, I imagined, my own to follow shortly though how they would operate on lungs sick with pneumonia I didn't know. At least I was finally able to make sense of what was going on. Apparently the wetness of a person's lungs just slows down the nanomachines, and apparently each microscopic automaton carries the plans for the entire finished set of equipment. They are programmed to work together if they encounter others of their kind, but all you really need is one of them. It just takes longer if you start from such a small beginning. Still, at the rate things were going, Mr. Schumberg thought I could look forward to a satellite uplink and all the necessary receivers and transmitters in my own chest by Thursday noon unless they could cut the damn things out.

I watched nurses set up a table with disposable plastic gowns and gloves and masks, just outside the door to our room. The head nurse soon walked in covered in protective gear. She asked Mrs. Schumberg and Ann to step out to gown, glove, and mask, too.

"What's the point now?" Mrs. Schumberg asked. "I've been with Bernie every day since he took sick."

"Gown and mask now or leave the room," was all the nurse said. She stood in the middle of the room until Mrs. Schumberg and Ann had stepped out to do as she ordered.

I stopped the nurse before she could leave. "Ma'am," I said. "My doctor said I would be getting a different room."

"I'm afraid not," she said. "Administration ordered us to quarantine those of you with this problem in as small an area as possible. You'll be staying right where you are."

The nurse pulled a large trash can into the room and positioned it by the door. She pulled off her gown and gloves, threw them in the trash, and left quickly. Ann and Mrs. Schumberg came back in dressed in the hot plastic. Ann told Mr. Schumberg and me, her voice muffled through the mask, that they'd taped a contamination warning next to the door and hospital policy about the use of protective gear when entering the room, instructions on how to take it off when leaving the room so as

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not to spread what might be inside, and warnings to visitors and staff.

"Will plastic protect people from your nanomachines?" I asked Mr. Schumberg.

Mr. Schumberg hit his call nurse button. The head nurse stepped back to the doorway.

"Plastic is no protection," Mr. Schumberg told her. "You should use cotton. The hydrocarbons in plastic will attract the nanomachines much faster."

"Your company advised us that this was a possibility," the nurse said. "But who has disposable cotton gowns anymore? I'm not sure we could even buy them. None of us will wear the gowns or masks very long. We'll take them off and leave them in the trash in your room, which Sanitation will remove and burn each hour. Fire will apparently destroy any nanomachines on the plastic. The masks at least are cotton. It's the best we can do."

The nurse left, and the room grew suddenly quiet as the air-conditioning went silent. They apparently did not want the air from this room recirculating.

Mr. Schumberg reached out for his wife's hand. She stood up and put her gloved hand in his. "Get out of here," he told her. "You and Ann — go now and pray you don't already have them."

"I'm not leaving you, Bernie," she said.

"No," he said. "There were other projects, more dangerous. If my nanos escaped, so did theirs. If all those nanos work together, God knows what they'll build. This is a level ten."

Mrs. Schumberg put her hand over her mouth when he said that.

"What's level ten?" I asked.

Mrs. Schumberg looked at me. "Possible contamination not just of the local area, but of the entire world."

Oddly, I didn't feel tears in my eyes over any of this. I was starting to get very, very angry. "And there's no reliable way to turn off your machines?" I said. "You built something that could contaminate the world — and you did not first design a way to turn it off?"

"There's a way," he said. "We always kept a failsafe. We never thought it would come to this."

Ann and Mrs. Schumberg were gathering up their things.

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"Hydrogen bombs," he went on. "You can only stop a level ten in the early stages. The military observers back in the lab must know what happened." He looked at his wife with tears in his eyes. "Get out now."

But it was already too late. Hospital security turned back Ann and Mrs. Schumberg at the elevators. No one was leaving the hospital, or at least this floor, for now. Ann and Mrs. Schumberg regowned and gloved and masked and sat quietly back in their chairs. None of us talked. They did not even turn on the television. In that quiet, I could hear nurses and other patients coughing. Granted this was a pulmonary ward, but it seemed to me that I was hearing more coughing than before, especially among the staff. Ann and Mrs. Schumberg both coughed a little now, too. It was impossible not to imagine Mr. Schumberg's nanomachines fanning out to find what they needed in the local environment, a determined little plague gobbling up the dust between the tiles and the dirt tracked in on people's shoes and when that wasn't enough looking for what they needed in other places. They had clearly learned that they could find what they needed in human lungs. Mr. Schumberg's and my lungs had taught them that.

A team of nurses arrived to prep Mr. Schumberg for surgery. They untangled him from all the IV lines, but not the oxygen feed. That would go with him. He looked over at me. "I'm sorry," he said.

I did not know what to say. He'd worked on a project that could contaminate the world and that only hydrogen bombs could control, but he was sorry. His apology rang a little hollow to me. I ended up not saying anything in reply.

The nurses pulled a transfer bed alongside Mr. Schumberg's bed.

"Can you sit up?" one of the nurses asked.

He tried, but he could not sit up. Apparently he was suddenly too weak to move. "It hurts to move," he said, and he coughed and coughed.

Nurses walked to either side of the bed and tried to lift Mr. Schumberg forward, but they could not do it. They could not budge him from the bed, either. He coughed and coughed and moaned.

One of the nurses pulled back the blankets. There were no restraints, if that was what she was looking for, but there was blood slowly seeping out from around Mr. Schumberg's back.

Mrs. Schumberg gasped, and Ann stood up. The head nurse went for

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towels to staunch the blood with. They tried to turn Mr. Schumberg onto his side, but they could not move him.

"Stop!" Mr. Schumberg said. "Just let me lie here for a minute."

"We have to stop the bleeding," the head nurse said. She started feeling underneath Mr. Schumberg's back. "Call Dr. Adams!" she said after a moment. "Stat."

Adams was one of the three doctors I'd seen conferring on Mr. Schumberg's case. He came on the run, as did the resident intern in charge of the floor that afternoon.

"For God's sake gown and mask first!" the head nurse shouted at them when they rushed into the room.

They went back out and did as she asked, then she had them feel under Mr. Schumberg's back. "Something's hooking his back to the mattress. It's gone through the sheets and into the plastic padding."

Dr. Adams felt under Mr. Schumberg's back. There was more and more blood oozing onto the bedding. Dr. Adams knelt to look under the bed. "Just wheel him to surgery in this bed," he ordered. "Now. I'll call the OR to advise them."

FTER THEY LEFT, I lay alone again in the darkening room. But I did not lie there for long. I sat up so that my back could not touch the bed. I looked behind me for signs of blood on the bedding, but there were none. Yet.

I felt around my back for odd bumps, but there were none, either. Still, I did not lie back down.

I sat there, thinking. If what Mr. Schumberg had said were true, there were people I needed to warn to get out of the city. It being late afternoon on a Tuesday, I reached lots of answering machines. I left messages telling my old friends to leave town — to call me for details if they wanted, but that they had better trust me on this one, especially if they couldn't reach me at the hospital for some reason. The only person I found at home was my cousin Alyson in Magna.

"Why didn't you tell me you were in the hospital?" she asked.

"That's not important," I said. I tried to explain what was happening and that she should take her kids and leave now.

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She was quiet for a time. "Look," she said. "Are you all right? I mean, this isn't making sense."

She probably thought my dementia had gotten worse. "It *will* make sense," I said. "I just hope it's not too late for you when it does."

She said nothing.

"It must be making news," I said. "Is there anything odd on the channels about Salt Lake?"

We both turned on the same twenty-four-hour news channel. Five minutes later they ran a story about the closure of the Salt Lake City International Airport. An early spring heatwave had buckled so many of the runways, they claimed, that no flights could take off or land. Since Salt Lake is a Delta hub, this was big news — hundreds of flights had to be rerouted. Officials did not know when the problem would be resolved, especially if each runway had to be resurfaced. Of course, the day's high temperature had only been sixty-seven, but they interviewed an expert who explained why sixty-seven degrees Fahrenheit was high enough on a sunny day to buckle runways.

"Oh my God!" Alyson said slowly as she read between the lines.

"Go now before they close the roads," I said.

We wished each other luck and hung up. Maybe they had already closed the roads, I thought. I'd have to wait until five o'clock and the local news for cleverly disguised stories about that. The airport story, however, made it clear that somebody was quarantining these valleys. I realized, of course, that no responsible government could let people fly all over the world and spread Mr. Schumberg's nanomachines. Still, I was surprised that it was happening so fast. It was almost as if they had had a plan for this in place. On a whim, I pulled the telephone book out of the top dresser drawer and looked up the number for the bus station. I called them just to see if buses were moving. I asked if I could buy a ticket to Denver that night.

"I'm sorry, sir," the attendant said. "We are unable to book any tickets at this time. Please call back in the morning."

She would not give me a reason for her inability to sell tickets. I could only get a recording at the train station.

Oh, we were good people, I thought. Everybody was doing what he or she had been told to do, at least for now. I wondered how many people in

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Salt Lake really knew what was happening. There were three million people in the connected valleys along the Wasatch Front. It would not take long before lots of them were asking questions. I wished Alyson and my friends luck out on the roads.

The head nurse phoned me to ask for the names of everyone who had visited me in the hospital.

"Just my doctor," I said.

"No one else? No friends came by? No family?"

I hated answering those questions. "No," I said. "I have one sister, but she's in Minneapolis."

"All right," she said, and then she coughed. "Sorry to call you like this. I just didn't want to pull on one of those hot gowns again. Saves time and gowns."

Oddly, after the phone calls, I slept for a time. When I dreamed, I found myself helping to build the wall around the downtown highrises again. The entire cityscape was weirder in this dream. Large sections of the valley seemed to have been flattened to the ground, while among the towers lacy filaments strung with lights danced on the evening breezes. It was so hot down where we were working. Everyone's shirt was wet with sweat. I wished that I could be twenty stories up to feel the breeze. We could not feel a breath of air where we worked and sweated. I tried to wipe the sweat off my forehead.

I woke with a start. My doctor was holding my wrist in her gloved hand, taking my pulse.

"You can still feel a pulse through these gloves," she said. "Sorry to startle you."

"It's so hot in here," I said.

"I asked Housekeeping to bring in a fan. They should be on the way with it. Your temperature's up. One-oh-four now. Pulse is high, too."

I could feel my heart racing.

"We're taking you into surgery in two hours."

"That late in the day?" I asked.

"None of us is leaving here, so it's easy to round up a top-notch team.

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The entire hospital's under quarantine. Meantime, the police are tracking down everybody who might have come in contact with Mr. Schumberg or his company, and they're bringing them here to be checked. Apparently they've already turned up six other cases among the people who've been calling in sick at his company. Their HMOs were treating them for everything from bronchitis to asthma. They have them down in the ER now as the initial intake area, but they'll be bringing them up to this floor for care."

"How is Mr. Schumberg?"

"Still in surgery. I'll be heading down to see what they bring out of him before we start on you. But what you have is much smaller. It will not be so hard to remove."

"How do you know that surgery will get it all?" I asked. "Apparently a radio tower can grow from just one nanomachine. How do you know that you won't have to cut this out of me today, then repeat the procedure again four days later, then again four days after that?"

"We don't," she said. "All I know is that what we can see now must come out. We'll cross other bridges if and when we have to."

I turned my head and covered my mouth to cough and decided to tell her the rest of what Mr. Schumberg had said. "It might be too late for all of us anyway," I said.

"Hang in there," she said. "We've been through a lot together, you and me. This is just the latest challenge."

"No, you don't understand. Has anyone told you how the government would control a level ten contamination, and that this might be a level ten?"

"I've heard," she said. She pulled up a chair and sat down. She looked mostly tired now, not angry. "The rumor mill is working overtime in this town, as you can imagine. We've got maybe a quarter of a million people trying to walk over the mountains since every other way out of the valley is closed. The police and the National Guard on the other side are just rounding them up and taking them to camps when they come down through the passes."

"But you didn't try to get out? Surely some are making it through. How can you stay here?"

"I have patients to care for and more on the way."

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She stepped to the window and looked out at the city. "I don't think they'll drop bombs just yet," she said. "The medical community in these valleys is working furiously to discover how far the contagion has spread. Surely the government will wait till we've at least answered that question. Besides, they won't let me leave. No one can leave. Plenty of the staff has tried. This place is sealed tight. Believe me, if I could have had you and my other patients evacuated to the hospital in Cheyenne, I would have."

Having part of your lung removed is no fun. But having it cut out when you have pneumonia is the equivalent of medieval torture. Pneumonia makes you cough, and each cough after my surgery was agony. They kept me heavily sedated, so I did not know much except the pain until the day after the surgery. They had my bed positioned at a ninety-degree angle, so I was sitting when I woke up. There was a different man in the bed next to mine.

"Who are you?" I asked him, and he told me some name I can't remember.

When my doctor made rounds, I asked her what had happened to Mr. Schumberg. She was quiet for a time, then she took hold of my arm. "He died during surgery," she said. "I didn't want to tell you till after your own surgery."

I did not know what to say. I looked at the lilacs Mrs. Schumberg had brought me.

"Aren't you afraid of catching this?" I asked my doctor.

"Of course. But if I were afraid of catching my patients' troubles, I would never have become a doctor."

I wanted to send Mrs. Schumberg flowers. I imagined that she was still here in the hospital, quarantined like the rest of us. I wondered if the gift shop could find her and deliver them to her, but I felt too sick to call the gift shop then. At least Mrs. Schumberg and Ann were together.

My doctor showed me a picture of what they had cut out of my lungs. It looked like a black metal rectangle with a knob forming on one end. They'd had it incinerated.

I knew the hospital had become more crowded — it was much noisier outside my room — but I did not realize just how crowded it was until they

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took me to Radiology to x-ray my lungs. We could hardly move down the hallways. There were people sleeping in every available chair and others sleeping in sleeping bags on the floors. They had apparently quarantined the entire day and night shifts of doctors, nurses, and interns because many of the people I saw were medical personnel. But there were lots of other people as well just wandering the hallways. They all looked bewildered and tired.

They took my x-rays, then wheeled me back up to bed. After about an hour, my doctor came in with the x-rays in hand. She looked grim.

"It's growing back," she said. "Surgery is backed up, but I was able to call in a few favors and schedule you for surgery at four o'clock this afternoon."

"It won't stop it," I said. "You know that now."

She sat in the chair next to my bed. "What do you want me to do?" she asked. "We can't leave it inside you."

I thought for a minute. I imagined all of us with nanomachines consenting to euthanasia and having our bodies burned, but then I remembered something Mr. Schumberg had said. "High dose radiation might stop it," I said. I told my doctor what Mr. Schumberg had told me.

"How high is high?" she asked. "Wasn't he referring to hydrogen bombs?"

"Who knows?" I said. "But don't they use radiation in cancer treatment? The equipment must be here to expose me to it. What do we have to lose? Use me as a guinea pig. Find a way to stop this before they do something drastic."

She left without saying another word.

Early the next morning, they covered my head and lower body with lead, then they shot my chest full of radiation. Afterward, back in my room and bed, I had never felt so sick. My body was rigid and hot. For a time, I could not even blink my eyes.

"He's going into shock," I heard my doctor say. "Get more blankets in here. Hurry!"

I sat there waiting for the blankets, but the very first time I was able to blink my eyes again I threw up. It went everywhere. It was bloody like Mr. Schumberg's had been.

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A team of cleaning ladies eventually came in, but Maria was not with them.

"Where's Maria?" I asked.

"Who's Maria?" my doctor asked.

I explained about the cleaning lady who had helped the night Mr. Schumberg had gotten sick.

"They've been checking everyone who entered this room," she said. "I'll make sure they've looked at her."

BUT MARIA WAS not in the hospital. She did not answer her telephone. The police found her house empty, some of her things hurriedly packed and gone. She had not come to work the last two days, and even before the quarantine she had not called in to request sick or vacation time.

But by evening, they knew what had happened. Apparently Maria's papers had been forged. She had entered this country illegally. The INS had arrested her the morning after the shift during which she had cleaned this room. They had transported her that same day to the Mexican border and handed her over to officials in Nogales.

"Maria's deportation probably saves us from the bombs," was all my doctor said when she told me about it. "What would be the point now?"

Eventually I dozed off, and for the last time I was working to build walls. They were mostly high now in that dream, surfaced and smooth, and I could see people — or things, I could not be sure when I looked closely — walking along the tops of those walls. For some reason I knew not to look too closely or for too long. I held tightly to the rocks in my arms. I concentrated on my work.

When I came to the unfinished part of the wall and after I had handed my rocks up to men working above me, I could see out across the valley if I stood on tiptoe. It lay completely flat now, flatter than it had ever been. It looked paved. There were no buildings. There were no roads. There were no habitations and nothing natural to be seen. The white paving on the valley floor shined brightly in the moonlight, and in the south something was eating at the mountains. I could not see the Oquirrhs. To the west, everything was completely flat and silent. Wind hissed over the smooth paving.

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The next morning, x-rays showed that the anomaly in my left lung had not grown, and it did not grow the day after that either. The radiation had stopped it. They started treating everyone with it, and soon they found that lower doses repeated over several days worked just as well. I underwent surgery for the last time to remove the dead nano-construct in my lung.

They never did find Maria Consuela de Alvarez. But eventually, of course, the entire world knew everywhere she had gone in her last days, even what she had looked at and where she had turned her head. The bus the INS had transported her in and the bus she had taken to her village south of Nogales had both apparently been hot and without air-conditioning. They had ridden with the windows open. Maria had had a window seat on the right-hand side of the bus all the way from Salt Lake to Nogales, then on the left-hand side in Sonora. We know that, of course, because of all the bizarre machines that grew along the roadsides in Utah and Arizona and Sonora wherever she had coughed out the window. Mr. Schumberg's projects had combined with the other projects escaped from his laboratory to create monstrous machines they had never intended. The army and National Guard had quickly killed, if that's what you call it, the ones in America with radiation and fire.

My sister called from Minneapolis. She had been trying to call me, and had finally reached Alyson, home again after being stuck in traffic on the roads for a day and a half. "Why didn't you call me?" my sister asked.

"I didn't want to worry you."

"How can I not worry about you? You're my big brother. You used to take me to parties with your friends and made me feel older and grown up. You read all the Jane Austen novels to me and taught me how to dance. I'm flying out to take care of you as soon as they lift the quarantine."

And she did come. It was my sister who drove me home from the hospital. She was the first person I cooked the rigatoni pesto for.

My sister stayed for two weeks. We had long talks over coffee on the back porch, and we looked at pictures of when we were kids. I slept a lot. She took me to follow-up appointments with my doctor and with specialists

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from the CDC. One night she invited Alyson and her kids over and cooked dinner. She helped me manage the requests for interviews from all over the world including, of course, the one for this story about how I had met Maria. My sister bought me a new cap after my hair fell out from the radiation treatment.

Lawyers from all over the country were also contacting me. I did not join the class-action lawsuit — my lawyers felt I had a chance at a huge settlement on my own. The intern had been right. But if I lived to see money at the end of the litigation I wasn't sure what I would do with it. Take my sister to Paris, maybe. Or to Rome.

I had looked up Bernard Schumberg in the telephone book, of course, so I had Mrs. Schumberg's number and address, but I had hesitated to call to offer condolences. I had not sent flowers. Finally, the day before my sister was to fly home, I had her drive me to the Schumbergs'. Their house was on a shady street in a nice neighborhood on the east bench. It was a small turn-of-the-century Victorian. The yard was neat and well kept. The last of the lilacs were blooming in the back yard.

I carried a bouquet of carnations and went alone to the door and knocked. After a moment, I heard someone inside. The door opened, and it was Mrs. Schumberg. Tears came at once to her eyes, and I could not keep them back either. I handed her the flowers and I wiped my eyes and she invited me in. She was wearing a scarf to hide her bald head. Of course she had had to have radiation treatments, I thought. How could she not have picked up the nanomachines?

I told her that I could not stay long, that my sister was waiting in the car. Mrs. Schumberg did not invite her in, so I knew that I had done the right thing by leaving my sister there. It was too soon for Mrs. Schumberg to see people.

We did not know what to say to each other. "He was a good man," she said finally.

"He loved you," I said. "He couldn't stand it if you weren't with him. You were so good to him."

I left quickly.

I bought all the books with photographs of the nanomachines in the deserts, but I keep looking at the pictures of what they turned into in

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Sonora. We mostly don't know what they were. We have ideas on some. They had longer to work in Sonora, so everything there was bigger and more elaborate. The plans of all those different projects in Mr. Schumberg's laboratory had combined in so many unexpected ways. In their short time, the nanomachines in Sonora had "learned" more than anyone could have predicted. Some of the constructs looked like nothing more than beautiful modern sculpture. Others blended into the landscape and could be found only with heat signatures. Some were enormous, clawed horrors lurking in side canyons that, had they lived, would have begun to walk about the land to hunt and take what they needed. None of them "lived" long.

But the barren white paving over what had once been Maria's village haunts me the most. It concealed an enormous transmitter that had been calling the stars for eight days before they killed it. No one has been able to crack the code of those transmissions. We don't know what it was saying. We don't know what it was calling. We don't know why its transmissions were beamed at only three stars in alternating order. We don't know what will happen because of it.

The world is mostly afraid of the answers to those questions. But I look at the pictures of that smooth paving and wonder. Inside that construct, part of whatever it was, was all that had made up Maria Consuela de Alvarez, a little woman who had found the courage to smuggle herself here to try to better her condition. She had taken a job no one else had wanted. She had come in the night to help sick people.

I don't know if any part of her could have survived to influence what was happening to her and her village. I could not have influenced what was growing inside of me, I know that. But if the construct had listened to Maria before it killed her, if it had tried to understand her (if it had had that ability), maybe the transmissions were calling angels to Earth, not devils. I'd like to live long enough to find out.

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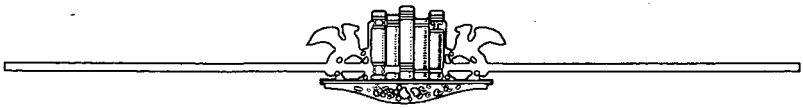

# Books To Look For

## CHARLES DE LINT

*Tithe*, by Holly Black, Simon & Schuster, 2002, $16.95.

I KNOW THAT my enthusiasms can sometimes seem ...too enthusiastic. Perhaps this is a good time to restate what I perceive to be the mission of this column: I have so little space — three books a month, eleven months a year, gives me only thirty-three books to review out of the hundreds that are published. That being the case, I'm not interested in taking up column space with reviews of bad books. There isn't room enough to tell you about all the *good* books. And the truth is, there's a certain selfishness involved. I'll only review a book I've read all the way through and I don't *want* to read crap, never mind review it.

So that's why the bulk of the reviews you'll find under my byline are so positive. The danger of this is that when something's astonishingly good, I feel as though I've already used up all my superlatives and good will and I'm uncertain how to convey my passion in a manner that will convince you that you really need to try a particular title such as the one in hand.

But that won't stop me from trying.

There are a couple of hurdles I know I have to overcome for many of you in regards to Holly Black's debut novel. The first is that it's being published as Young Adult fiction. But before you stop reading and skip to the next book discussed below, let me just say that *Tithe*, for all its youthful exuberance and young protagonist, approaches its material with far more self-possession and sense of wonder than do most adult novels that I consider for this column.

The second thing is that the basics of the plot — young girl caught in a conflict between two warring courts of Faerie in an urban setting — might not seem to be the freshest of ideas, but let me assure

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you that Black not only puts a bright new spin on the material, she makes it her own.

There are many positives to be found in *Tithe*. Black writes with an edgy confidence belying the fact that this is a first novel. She has a true gift for the entirely appropriate name. She brings characters to life with a sketching splash of details that still recreates them fully realized in the reader's head. She tells her story in such a way that it is as immediate and contemporary as a charted song, but also as timeless as a beloved fairy tale. But mostly it's that she returns wonder and true danger to the plot device of mortals interacting with Faerie.

The denizens of Black's magic realms aren't the fuzzy warm faeries that many New Agers have turned to now that they've lost interest in crystals, aromatherapy, and the like. Nor are they the militaristic might-as-well-be Marines and ninjas that seem to populate far too many high fantasies these days. No, these are the amoral creatures that predate the banishment of fairy tales to the Victorian nursery. Some shifting and untrustworthy, others honorable. Some dangerous and sly, others instilling heart-stopping awe. And the trouble is, it's hard to tell which are which.

And then there's Kaye. New Jersey native. Part Asian, part nomad (her mother is forever in one failing rock band after another), and all heart. *Tithe* is her coming-of-age story. Like Kaye herself, it's brash and edgy, full of hope and longing, full of loss and discovery and wonder. Always that wonder.

This is literally one of the best fantasies I've read in years, never mind it being one of the best debut novels. And I'm immediately finding room for it on the small shelf of books that I can always unequivocally recommend when someone asks me for my favorite books in the fantasy field.

Did I mention that I loved it?

Or that you will, too?

*Are We Having Fun Yet?: American Indian Fantasy Stories*, by William Sanders, Wildside Press, 2002, $15.95.

The subtitle of William Sanders's new collection is a bit misleading. They aren't all fantasy stories (there are at least a couple that are sf, and another is a straight mystery). And while Indians certainly appear in each piece and many of the stories unquestionably speak from the Native American experience,

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their appeal is far more universal than that.

In setting, they range from the historical past to the speculative future. In theme, we have everything from an encounter with Egyptian gods (the Zelaznyesque "Ninekilier and the Neterw") to a tongue-in-cheek revenge fantasy that would do Sherman Alexie proud ("The Scuttling"). In between we can find one of the best alternate histories I've read in a long time (William Shakespeare living as a captive among Indians in "The Undiscovered"), erotica ("Tenbears and the *Bruja*"), a pair of near-future speculations (the heartbreaking "When This World Is All on Fire" and the hilarious "Elvis Bearpaw's Luck"), and three more stories, each better than the next.

What I love about Sanders's fiction is that it isn't one-note. The erotica and thrillers can also be humorous. The funny stories have a dark streak of seriousness running through them. They can flit from a helicopter crash to a conversation with a jackal-headed god. From the plight of adopted captives to a tribe putting on a localized version of *Hamlet*. From a tobacco ceremony to the Holmesian solving of a murder.

The prose ranges from ribald and earthy to passages with great spirit and hints of deep mystery. The characters stumble as often as they prevail, and they always come across as real people.

And while it's true that the stories collected here might give you some insight into the Native American experience, they only do so in terms of these particular characters's experience. Sanders writes about individuals, not culture heroes, although a sense of the mythic always seems to be bubbling under even the most mundane scene.

He has also supplied an overall introduction and notes to each story that both provide welcome background to the material and reveal insights into how Sanders has come to understand so much about what makes people tick. Trial and error, folks. Sanders has obviously lived a hard life. But to his credit, he has not only persevered; he has also found a way to turn those life lessons into art.

Highly recommended.

*The Warslayer*, by Rosemary Edghill, Baen, 2002, $7.99.

Here's a book that's the perfect summer read — and I apologize for telling you about it late in the year,

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but I'm reading it way back in August 2002 (this is almost like time travel, isn't it?), and in the heat we've had this week, it was with happy relief that I found a spot of shade and stretched out with Edghill's novel at the end of a day of work.

Now by calling it the perfect summer read, I don't mean to imply anything negative. *The Warslayer* simply delivers what it promises: a fun, mostly light-hearted romp.

It's the story of ex-gymnast Gloria McArdle, who plays the lead role in *Vixen the Slayer*, a new and extremely popular TV series. (Think Buffy meets Xena in Victorian England.) While on a publicity tour in the States (the show is filmed in Australia), McArdle is approached by three mages who think she's really Vixen, not an actress playing the part. They need her help to rescue their world. She tries to explain the truth and turns them down (thinking they're fans inviting her to a con), but something goes wrong and the next thing she knows she's in a fantasy world and if she doesn't learn to channel Vixen very quickly, she's in deep trouble.

I know. *GalaxyQuest* already covered some of this ground. But Edghill knows this, too; in fact, one of her characters cites the movie. What's important here isn't to Think Deep Thoughts, but to have fun. And fun it is. McArdle's a likable character, and part of the charm is her down-to-earth Aussie take on the whole unlikely situation.

To add to the fun, Edghill has roped fellow author Greg Cox into writing a "making of the cult phenomenon" introduction to start us off, and a first season episode guide at the end, both of which will surely make you smile.

You probably need to be a fan of the sort of TV show *The Warslayer* is based on to get all the jokes, but even if you're not, I'm sure you'll get a kick out of the whole fish-out-of-water scenario that drives the plot.

*Origami Bird*, by Steve Resnic Tem, Wormhole Books, 2002, not for sale.

I got this Independence Day card during the last week of June and certainly hope the little story by Tem that takes up two of its "pages" gets a wider readership than the three hundred recipients of the card.

"Origami Bird," in all its brevity, manages to capture not only a moment of great beauty — I love the image at the end of the story

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when dreams fly free — but also the day-by-day small beauties we can all make (transformations from dross into a gold that can't be held, only felt), no matter how seemingly empty our lives might appear to be.

I usually hate the short-short form, but this is more like a prose poem, something that can be reread and savored, over and over again. Thanks, Steve, for giving life to this story, and to the folks at Wormhole Books for sharing it. Now please make it available to a wider audience.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

*"Some hackers broke into our washer and shrank all our clothes."*

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# Books

## JAMES SALLIS

*L. Frank Baum: Creator of Oz*, by Katharine M. Rogers, St. Martin's Press, 2002, $27.95.

*Karel Capek — Life and Work*, by Ivan Klíma, Catbird Press, 2002, $23.

*Mervyn Peake: My Eyes Mint Gold*, by Malcolm Yorke, The Overlook Press, 2002, $37.50.

INTERESTINGLY enough, the first major essay on L. Frank Baum, written by Martin Gardner, appeared in this very magazine under the editorship of co-founder Anthony Boucher in the January and February 1955 issues. Everyone knows Oz from the movie, of course. It's a part of our common mythology, part of America's shabby, patchwork culture. The older among us may dimly recall Tik-Tok the mechanical man, or H. M. Wogglebug, T. E. (whose name Phil Farmer appropriated for his classic *The Lovers*), or Jack Pumpkinhead. Still, I suspect that Baum has few contemporary readers, that notions of his books are badly amiss, and that even the readers he has, like myself, know little of the author.

Lyman Frank Baum was born on May 15, 1856, near Syracuse, to a wealthy family. His father, a natural entrepreneur, had been by turns a barrel maker, manufacturer of butter and cheese, owner of oil fields, real-estate speculator, and banker. In childhood Baum probably developed rheumatic fever — some ailment, at any rate, that left his heart damaged. Launched into the world, he worked as a cub reporter on the *New York World*, owned a printing shop and newspaper in Pennsylvania, managed a chain of opera houses, then, manifesting a lifelong interest in theater, acted in various traveling troupes.

In 1881 he had his first success as a writer with *The Maid of Arran*,

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an Irish musical comedy for which he created book, music, and lyrics. He also produced, directed, and played the romantic lead. During the first year of the play's long run Baum married Maud Gage, left the cast, and returned with her to Syracuse where he set up as manufacturer of a crude-oil product used to grease axles. Four years later, having lost interest in this enterprise and proven unable to repeat his theatrical success, Baum relocated to a frontier town in South Dakota. Here he opened Baum's Bazaar, a general store on the grand scale. All too ready to grant credit, clinging to the very edge of civilization, and at best commercially challenged, Baum saw this too fail.

Again he turned to journalism, buying the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*, ultimately another unsuccessful commercial venture though it proved a watershed in Baum's career. In editorials he wrote, and in a column created for the paper, "Our Landlady," Baum honed his skills as a writer. Chicago was the next stop, first as reporter for *The Chicago Post*, then as traveling salesman for an importing firm. In 1897, the same year that he found success with *Show Window*, a monthly periodical for window trimmers, Baum published his first children's book, *Mother Goose in Prose*. Four more followed in quick order.

*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* appeared in 1900, selling 90,000 copies in two years. Baum was forty-four.

It was in *Wizard* that Baum first came into his own. The narrative looks upon marvels with a child's direct, plain view of things, yet leaves room for a broad range of humor and for investigation of genuine intellectual questions. Grotesque, Dickensian, lovable characters abound. Fantasy grounds itself in realistic detail. Given one or two outrageous premises, all else is logical. The Scarecrow cannot pick up small things with its clumsy padded fingers. A sawhorse is brought to life but cannot follow commands until ears are built for it. Countries are different colors because they're represented that way on maps.

Tremendously prolific, under his own name and seven pseudonyms Baum went on to produce sixty-two books in nineteen years. As Edith Van Dyne he penned seventeen novels for teenage girls; as Laura Bancroft, six traditional light fantasies.

Baum died of heart failure in 1919 in Hollywood, where he had built a fabulous house, Ozcot, and

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formed the largely unsuccessful film production company that occupied his final years. *Glinda of Oz* was completed, supposedly from his notes, by Ruth Plumly Thompson, who eventually added perhaps twenty more books to the Oz canon. Further volumes came by way of John Rea Neill, Rachel Cosgrove, and Jack Snow.

Much of Baum's work, for all its great appeal to children, proves surprisingly sophisticated. Martin Gardner points out that when Dorothy visits the Kingdom of Utensia, populated by kitchenware, no less than fifty puns occur in eight pages of text. Katharine Rogers in turn underlines the influence of theosophy and the woman's suffrage movement on Baum's imagination.

His mother-in-law, Matilda Gage, was a leader in the suffrage movement, author of the massive *Woman, Church and State: A Historical Account of the Status of Woman Through the Christian Ages* (1893). Many of Baum's editorials as a newspaperman dealt with suffragist issues. Women are at a preponderance in Oz. The land is defended by Glinda's army of girls. All true power resides in a matriarchy of female witches.

In theosophy Baum found affirmation of a reality beyond the everyday visible world. Equally, his representation of magic as operating by natural if occult laws, and the propensity of his characters to solve problems by virtue of their own courage and enterprise, reflect dearly held theosophist values.

For the most part Rogers sticks close to the path of standard biography, offering little by way of literary criticism or analysis, though in passages such as the following, comparing Carroll's Alice and Baum's Dorothy, she not only exhibits fine discrimination but also strikes to the very heart of the Oz books' eternal appeal.

> The significant difference is that Dorothy is able to make sense of the confusing world she is plunged into and to influence it; people listen to her, and she can act effectively and resist unreasonable authority; her good sense and resolution win the success they deserve; she overcomes all obstacles in her path and gets home. Alice, on the other hand, is always subject to forces she cannot comprehend or control; she is ordered around, expected to follow rules she cannot know, bombarded with questions she cannot answer, driven in

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directions she has not chosen.... Baum's fantasy of an idealized world reassures children that they can solve puzzles and overcome difficulties. Carroll's gives exaggerated, concrete form to the frustrations children face in their everyday lives.

Oz is at heart, of course, deeply conservative, "an American version of the pastoral ideal" where old-fashioned rural values are carefully preserved, people are basically good, all issues simple and straightforward.

Little wonder we enjoy a bus ride through.

Baum died almost at the moment that Virginia Woolf claimed our world, the consciousness of our race, changed forever. Quite aside from their obvious surface delights, which are many and multifarious, I suspect that Baum's books may tell us more about what we once were, or thought ourselves to be — about an America in terminal transition from a rural to an urban society — than any number of naturalist novels or tracts.

Lives overlap here. The years following Baum's death, say 1920 to 1923, were the most important creative period for Karel Capek. In 1918, with the end of World War I, the Czech Republic had come into being. Capek *(Chop'-ek)*, in many ways a bloodless, repressed man, had found his great love, Olga Scheinpflugova. He was artistic director of Prague's Vinohrady Theater. In this period he published *Painful Tales*, collaborated with brother Josef on *From the Life of the Insects*, turned out scripts and outlines for a number of screenplays as well as travelogues such as *Letters from Italy* and well over 200 stories, articles, reviews, and feuilletons, wrote *R.U.R.*, *The Absolute at Large*, *The Makropoulos Secret*, and, finally, the novel *Krakatit*.

For much of the Twenties and Thirties, Capek was the leading writer in Czechoslovakia. Nor did his fame end there: routinely his plays opened on Broadway to great success following their premieres in his homeland. By 1936 he'd become a major contender for the Nobel Prize. Hitler, though, was working his magic nearby. And Capek was an outspoken anti-fascist who had just published *War with the Newts*, a satire on European dictatorships, colonialism, and capitalist greed. Nobel committee members asked if he might not write something a bit less controversial.

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"I have already written my doctoral dissertation" was his response. For many years his works were banned.

Today he is almost forgotten.

Catbird Press has set out to rectify that. Its recent *Cross Roads* combines Capek collections written during World War I and just after, one comprising metaphysical fables; the other, tales of characters faced with impossible choices. ("I wanted to show," Capek said, "man in humiliation and weakness, without debasing him as a human being.") *Cross Roads* is Catbird's third volume of Capek stories. These in turn are flanked by a wonderful new translation of *War with the Newts* and a marvelous anthology titled *Toward the Radical Center* that includes a new translation of *R.U.R.* — seven volumes in all.

Now Catbird has commissioned a biography of Capek from contemporary Czech writer Ivan Klíma.

*Karel Capek — Life and Work* is a marvel and a gift. Lightly written, it has far more the feel of an extended essay than of standard biography. Klíma is not only an immensely gifted writer in his own right, not only a perceptive, disciplined critic, but also a lifelong reader of Čapek, on whom he wrote his dissertation. He knows the work intimately, knows the man as well as he can be known, and we as readers are privileged to follow the free play of Klíma's mind across life, work and times. Literary biography does not get any better than this.

For Capek, Klíma posits, mankind is always under siege, from within and without. In *The Factory of the Absolute*, machines produce infinite quantities of goods without expenditure of energy — a sure trap. *The Makropoulos Secret* looks at prolonged life and the spiritual toll it would take. *Krakatit* deals with the invention of an atomic bomb. In *R.U.R.*, of course, the humans are under siege from robots who will replace them.

Here is Capek himself on the origins of *R.U.R.*

> To create a homunculus is a mediaeval idea; to bring it in line with the present century, this creation must be undertaken on the principle of mass production. We are in the grip of industrialism; this terrible machinery must not stop, for if it does it would destroy the lives of thousands. It must, on the contrary, go on faster and faster, even though

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in the process it destroys thousands and thousands of other lives.... A product of the human brain has at last escaped from the control of human hands. That is the comedy of science.

There is then what Capek calls the comedy of truth.

Factory director Domin, claiming that technological progress emancipates man from hard labor, is right. Alquist, who believes this progress dehumanizes him, is also right. The robots are right, Helena, the scientist's daughter who sides with them — everyone is right. All are morally right; they advocate their truths on the basis of ideals. This, Capek said, was the most dramatic element of modern civilization, that one human truth should be pitched so fatally against another.

*War with the Newts* is Capek's sidelong glance at the worst foibles of mankind and of his age. For 234 pages the novel moves along fairly straightforward satirical lines, here some Swift, there *Penguin Island*, a seasoning of Rabelais, a touch of Cervantes. Then, in an astonishing final chapter, "The Author Talks to Himself," a sudden cascade of alternative endings.

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Don't ask me what I want. Do you suppose *I* am making the continents crumble into dust, do you suppose *I* wanted this kind of ending?...I did what I could; I warned people in good time.... The world will probably disintegrate and become inundated — but at least it will do so for universally accepted political and economic reasons, at least it will do so with the aid of science, engineering and public opinion, with the application of all human ingenuity!

* * *

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It is the newts' world now. Perhaps men will simply go on working in the newts' factories. Perhaps with illness or plague nature will put right what man has messed up. Perhaps eastern newts will take up arms against western newts. Perhaps slogans such as Lemuria is for Lemurians, all foreigners out, will take hold. Perhaps great newt wars will be fought for national glory and greatness — all in the name of Genuine Newtdom.

Those words were written in 1936. Capek died, age 46, on Christmas Day 1938, three months after the Munich Agreement. The following year, Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia.

Lineaments of a life.

Mervyn Peake was born in 1911, in China, to missionary parents. Returned to England at age 12 carrying the experience of China — of the exotic, of poverty and human decay — within him. Carrying also within him, from the epidemic of same that swept China, the *Encephalitis lethargica* or "sleeping sickness" that would lie dormant for thirty years and, combining with Parkinson's, divide him from his life. Attended public schools, then the Royal Academy, first exhibited his paintings in 1931, began teaching art in 1936, the following year met and married Maeve Gilmore. During World War II served in the army and in 1945, as war artist, was among the first to enter the concentration camp at Belsen. Over the next decade worked as teacher, illustrator, painter, poet, playwright, novelist. Then his health began to collapse. The initial diagnosis was of a nervous breakdown; subsequently he underwent electroconvulsive therapy and cranial surgery. By the mid-60s he'd become permanently institutionalized. In November 1968, age 57, he died.

The whole of a human life reduced to a single paragraph. But what a paragraph — when few of us rate more than a sentence.

At the time of his death Mervyn Peake's reputation had long been in severe decline, his books out of print. It was only due to the efforts of Maeve, to the constant support of such as Graham Greene, Angus Wilson, and Anthony Burgess, and to the unremitting championing of his work by admirers like Lang Jones and Mike Moorcock, that the work has not gone missing. Maeve's memoir *A World Away*, recently reissued by Vintage in tandem with son Sebastian's own memoir, remains a cornerstone.

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And now we have this respectful, elegantly researched and written, eminently readable, eminently *human* biography by Malcolm Yorke.

Burgess believed that the very prolificacy of Peake's genius turned people away. Certainly his work swam upstream of contemporary trends. Into a world of Warhols, Peake brought forth Hogarth and Doré; on a playing field of filigreed fairy tales filled with cute furry creatures and the triumph of good over evil he stepped up to the plate with the greatest gothic work of all time, and one of the darkest. Whether in illustrations, poems, notebook sketches, or his triad of great novels, Peake's vision was unique, individual, uncompromising — all of a piece, and bleak as bleak may be.

Of his contemporaries, Peake said, "It's not so much their blindness as their love of blinkers." And to Moorcock, in the wrack of his illness, life's work fading away, "It feels like everything's been stolen."

But a few years ago, writing this column, I would have had to provide a summary of the Gormenghast trilogy: to speak at some length about the sprawling castle that's a world unto itself and of the absurd, melancholic, grotesque characters who inhabit it, of the endless, meaningless rituals observed there, of Titus Groan, heir to the throne, born at the beginning of the first novel and come to manhood at the end of the second, striking out from the castle, from his entire known universe, in the last.

That there's now no need to do so is the truest measure of Peake's resurgence and new recognition. His books are back in print in multiple editions. Younger writers such as M. John Harrison and China Miéville have absorbed his influence and carried it in new, exciting directions.

This — this evocation of worlds beside and behind our own visible, sensible one, the density of detail, this dailyness of the extraordinary into which all humanity's myths nonetheless may be folded — this is what first brought us to the literature of the fantastic. It is also what, whatever the vicissitudes of taste, however widely we read, brings us back.

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*Steve Popkes lives in Massachussetts, not too far from the locale of his last story for us, "Tom Kelley's Ghost." He works for an aviation technology firm called Avidyne and recently completed work on an integrated flight deck called the Entegra. His new story takes us down to a fairly exotic island where a woman might (just* might*) be able to find what she's looking for.*

# The Birds of Isla Mujeres

## By Steven Popkes

AFTERWARD, IT WAS NEVER the people she remembered, never faces or bodies or voices — even Alfredo's. It was always the wind, blowing from the west side of the island, and the frigate birds, balanced on their wingtips against the sky. They flew high above her, so black and stark they seemed made of leather or scales, too finely drawn to be feathered.

It was March, the beginning of the rainy season, and she had come to Isla Mujeres to leave her husband. That she had done this some half a dozen times before did not escape her and she had a kind of despairing fatalism about it. Probably this time, too, she would return. Her name was Jean Summat. Her husband, Marc, lived the professor's life in Boston. She, it was supposed, was to live the role of professor's wife. This was something she had never quite accepted.

Isla Mujeres. Island of Women.

She sat in a small pier cafe that jutted out into the water, waiting for her first meal on the island. In a few minutes it came. A whole fish stared

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glassily up at her from the plate. Delicately, she began to carve small pieces from it, and ate. She glanced up and a Mexican man in a Panama hat smiled at her. She looked back to her food, embarrassed.

Boston was cold right now and covered with a wet snow as raw as butcher's blood. But here in Mexico, it was warm. More importantly, it was cheap and people's lives here were still enmeshed in basics, not intricately curved in academic diplomacy.

She left the restaurant and stood on the pier watching the birds, feeling the warm heavy wind, sour with the hot smell of the sea. The late afternoon sun was masked with low clouds and in the distance was a dark blue rain. She had a room, money, and time.

THE AVENIDA RUEDA was clotted with vendors selling Mayan trinkets, blankets, pots, T-shirts, and ice cream. Several vendors tried to attract her attention with an "*Amiga*!" but she ignored them. A Mexican dressed in a crisp suit and Panama hat sat in an outdoor cafe and sipped his drink as he watched her. Just watched her.

Lots of Mexicans wear such hats, she told herself. Still, he made her nervous and she left the street to return to her room. On the balcony she watched the frigate birds and the people on the beach.

Jean swam in the warm water of Playa de Cocoa. When she came from the water she saw the man watching her from one of the cabañas as he sipped a Coke. She walked up to him.

"Why are you following me?"

The man sipped his Coke and looked back at her. "No entiende."

She looked at him carefully. "That's a lie."

There was a long moment of tension. He threw back his head and laughed. "Es verdad."

"Why — what the hell are you doing?"

"You are very beautiful, Señora."

"Jesus!"

"You need a man."

"I have a man." Or half a man. Or maybe more than a man. Do I still have him? Do I want him? Did I ever?

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"With specifications?"

She stared at him.

Hector led her through the rubble at the end of the Avenida Hidalgo to a small concrete house nearly identical to all the other concrete houses on the island. It was surrounded by a wall. Set into the top of the wall were the jagged spikes of broken soda bottles. She looked down the street. The other houses were built the same. There was a burnt-out car leaning against one wall, and a thin dog stared at her, his eyes both hungry and protective.

Inside, it smelled damp. It was dark for a moment, then he turned on a blue fluorescent light that lit the room like a chained lightning bolt. Leaning against the wall was a tall, long-haired and heavily built man with Mayan features. He did not move.

*What am I doing here?*

"This is Alfredo." Hector was looking at her with a considering expression.

She shook her head. The air in the room seemed thick, lifeless, cut off from the world. "Alfredo?"

"Alfredo. I show you." Hector opened a suitcase and took out a box with a complex control panel. He flipped two switches and turned a dial and the box hummed. Alfredo pushed himself away from the wall and looked around.

"Good God." She stared at him. Alfredo was beautiful, with a high forehead and strong lips. His body was wide and taut, the muscles rippling as he moved. Hector touched a button and he became absolutely still.

"You like him?"

She turned to Hector startled. She'd forgotten he was there. "What is this?"

"Ah! An explanation." He spoke in a deep conspiratorial whisper. "Deep in the mountains north of Mexico City is a great research laboratory. They have built many of these — andros? Syntheticos?"

"Androids."

"Of course. They are stronger and more beautiful than mortal men. But the church discovered it and forced them to close it down. The church is important here — "

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"That's a lie."

Hector shrugged. "The Señora is correct. Alfredo was a prisoner in the Yucatan. Condemned to die for despicable crimes. They did not kill him, however. Instead, they removed his mind and inlaid his body with electrical circuits. He is now more than a man — "

"That's another lie."

"The Señora sees most clearly." He paused a moment. "You have heard of the Haitian zombie? The Mayans had a similar process. My country has only recently perfected it, coupling it with the most advanced of scientific — "

Jean only stared at him.

He stopped, then shrugged. "What does it matter, Señora? He is empty. His mind does not exist. He will — imprint? Is that the correct word? — on anyone I choose."

"This is a trick."

"You are so difficult to convince. Let me show you his abilities." Hector manipulated the controls and Alfredo leaped forward and caught himself on one hand, holding himself high in the air with the strength of one arm. He flipped forward onto his feet. Alfredo picked up a branch from a pile of kindling and twisted it in both hands. There was no expression on his face but the muscles in his forearms twisted like snakes, the tendons like dark wires. The branch broke with a sudden gunshot report.

Hector stopped Alfredo at attention before them. "You see? He is more than man."

She shook her head. "What kind of act is this?"

"No act. I control him from this panel. The — master? maestro? — would not need this."

Control. Such control.

Hector seemed uncertain for a moment. "You wish to see still more? You are unsure of how he is controlled?" He thought for a moment. "Let me show you a feature."

In the stark light and shadows, she had not noticed Alfredo was nude. The Mayan turned into the light.

"There are several choices one could make when using Alfredo." Hector manipulated the box. "Pequeño."

Alfredo had a normal sized erection.

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She wanted to look away and could not. The Mayan face was before her, dark, strong, and blank.

"Medio," said Hector softly.

She looked again and the erection was twice as large, pulsing to Alfredo's breathing.

"Y monstruoso!" cried Hector.

Alfredo looked fit to be a bull, a goat, or some other animal. There was never any expression in Alfredo's eyes.

"Y nada," said Hector. And Alfredo's erection wilted and disappeared.

She couldn't breathe. She wanted to run, to hide from Alfredo, but she didn't want to be anywhere else.

"You are pleased, Señora?" Hector stood beside her.

Jean tried to clear her head. She looked away from both of them. No man could fake this. It was real, a marvelous control, a total subjugation. Was this what she had wanted all this time?

"A very nice show." She took a deep breath. "How much do I owe you?"

"You owe me nothing, Señora." Hector bowed to her. "But Alfredo is for sale." When she did not answer immediately, he continued. "He imprints on the owner, Señora. Then voice commands are sufficient. He will show initiative if you desire it, or not. He is intelligent, but only in your service."

"But you have the controls."

"They do not operate once imprinting occurs."

Crazy. Ridiculous.

"How much?" she heard herself asking.

Alfredo followed her home, mute, below the birds and the sky. She could smell him on the evening wind, a clean, strong smell.

"Do you speak?" she asked as he followed her up the steps to her room.

Alfredo did not answer for a moment. "Yes."

She asked him no more questions that night.

His mind was like a thunderstorm: thick, murky, dark, shot through intermittently by lightning. These were not blasts of intelligence or insight but the brightness of activity, the heat of flesh, the electricity of

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impulse. He was no more conscious of what happened or what caused his actions than lightning was conscious of the friction between clouds. Occasionally, very occasionally, a light came through him, like the sun through the distant rain, and things stilled within him.

He was a chained thunderbolt, unaware of his chains.

She copulated with Alfredo almost continuously the first three days. It was as if a beast had been loosed within her. If she wanted him to stroke her *thus*, he did so. If she wanted him to bite her *there*, it was done. Something broke within her and she tried to devour him.

It was only when she fully realized she *owned* him, that he would be there as long as she wanted him, that this abated. Then it was like coming up from underwater, and she looked around her.

Alfredo had cost her almost everything she had, nearly all the money she would have used to start a new life. She could not go back to Marc now. Perhaps buying Alfredo had been an act ensuring that. She didn't know. There were jobs on the island for Americans, but they were tricky and illegal to get.

At the end of the first day of a waitress job, she came to their room tired and angry. Alfredo was sitting on the edge of the bed staring out the window. It was suddenly too much for her.

"You! I do this to feed you." She stared at him. He stared back with his dark eyes.

"I can't go home because of you." She slapped him. There was no response.

She turned away from him and looked out at the sea and the birds. This wasn't going to work.

Wait.

Jean turned to him. "Can you work?"

He ponderously turned his head toward her. "Yes."

"You do speak Spanish?"

"Sí."

"Come with me."

She looked through her toilet bag and found a pair of scissors. They were almost too long for what she wanted but they would do. The fluorescent light in the bathroom glittered off the steel as she cut his hair,

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a sharp, pointed light. After a few moments, she turned his head up toward her. The hair was nearly right. His cheek was smooth against her hand. Impulsively, she kissed him and he moved toward her but she pushed him back down in the chair. "All right," she said finally. "Take a shower." He started the water and she watched him for a long minute. After that, she thought, after that, we'll see.

LFREDO FOUND a job almost immediately and made enough to keep them both alive. Now, Jean lay on the beach and tanned. Alfredo worked hard and his strength was such that he could work through the siesta. He had only to watch a thing done and then could do it. The workers on Isla Mujeres grumbled. Jean shrewdly noticed this and sent him across the bay into Cancún where the wages were higher.

Two weeks after this they had enough to move into the El Presidente Hotel.

That night she looked at him. "Ever the sophisticate," she murmured. "Go get clothes fit to wear here."

Alfredo did and she went to dinner in the Caribe on his arm. He looked so strong and dignified the other women in the room looked at him, then away. Jean felt a thrill go through her. Over dinner she murmured instructions which he executed flawlessly. She felt quite fond of him.

Over coffee, the waiter brought them a message from a Lydia Conklin and friend, inviting them for cocktails.

She read it. Alfredo did not — yet — read and stared away toward the open doorway of the bar.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

He turned to her. "Nothing."

"Look around the room regularly like a normal person."

He did not answer but instead watched the room as if bored or waiting for the check.

Jean read the note again.

She shrugged and signed the check. The two of them went to the bar for a drink.

"Excuse me." A woman stood up in front of them. "I am Lydia Conklin."

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Jean looked first at her, then at Alfredo. "I'm Jean Summat. I got your note — "

"I was dying for American speech." As she spoke she only glanced at Jean. Her eyes were full of Alfredo. "You don't know what it's like." Now, she turned to Jean. "Or perhaps you do."

"I've been here a few weeks."

"Señora Summat."

That voice Jean knew. Behind and to her left was Hector. "Good evening, Hector."

"You know Hector too?" Lydia said idly. "How wonderful."

"Sit with us, Señora. Please." Hector pulled out a chair for her. Jean looked at Alfredo. Alfredo paused a moment, watched her closely, then sat across from her at the table.

Hector sat next to Jean. He leaned toward Lydia. "Señora Summat, Alfredo, and myself were business partners."

"'Were'?" Lydia raised her eyebrows.

"The business is accomplished. It is of no matter."

Jean interrupted. "Are you down for a vacation, Lydia?"

Lydia shrugged. "In a way. I'm down for my health. This last year I went mad."

Hector laughed. Jean smiled uneasily. Lydia shrugged again.

"Señora Conklin makes a good joke."

"It was, I suppose." Lydia sipped her drink. "I came down here two years ago and fell in love with a Mayan. I'm back to see if lightning can strike twice."

Something in her face was hard to look at for more than a moment. Jean looked away. "What was the Mayan's name?"

"Alberto. Hector is helping me find another."

Hector seemed nervous. He turned to Jean. "I introduce Señora Conklin to eligible men — "

"He pimps for me." Lydia lit a cigarette. "Your Mayan reminds me of Alberto."

"Alfredo. His name is Alfredo." Jean looked at Alfredo. His face was impassive.

"The names are almost the same." Lydia blew smoke in the air above the table.

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"Did Alberto care for you?"

"He—" Lydia paused a moment "—he adored me. He was my slave."

"Señoras? Would you care for more drinks?" Hector was perspiring now.

Jean and Lydia stared at one another.

Jean turned to Alfredo. "What do you think of this?"

Alfredo did not speak for a long minute, watching the two women. Then he smiled at Jean. "A Mayan is no woman's slave." And he laughed.

Lydia stared at him with an open mouth. Hector frowned.

Jean looked at them both in triumph. "I suspect that may be the definitive Mayan answer. Alfredo, would you take me to my room?"

Alfredo stood quickly and led her away.

Jean was thinking: *What is in him? What is in there?*

It was June now and the island was somewhat hotter and much more humid. The frigate birds flew low over the buildings as if the wet air could not support them. The Mexican fishermen brought in great nets of snapper and bonita. The American sport fishermen disappeared in search of marlin and sailfish.

Lydia Conklin stayed. She always seemed to be watching Alfredo. Hector seemed to leave the island regularly but he always returned. Jean fancied she could tell when either was around just by the feeling of eyes on Alfredo.

Often Lydia would invite them to dinner, or cards, or for drinks. Usually Jean turned her down. Sometimes, though, they would go and Jean never could figure out why. There was a dance here, a dangerous ballet that attracted her.

One evening, they were drinking in Lydia's apartment in the Presidente.

"You know," Lydia began, swirling tequila in a brandy snifter. "I've been seeing you both for a couple of months now. I don't know what Alfredo does. What do you do, Alfredo?"

Alfredo sat back in his chair and looked at Jean, then back to Lydia. "Do?"

"How do you support yourself?"

For a moment, Alfredo did not seem to understand. "I do contract work."

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Jean glanced at him over the rim of her glass. *Good God. What have I got here?*

"Contract work?" Lydia came over to him. "Did you build these great strong arms at a desk job?"

Alfredo shook his head. "I do nothing with a desk. I work with bricklayers. Tilers. Those who build walls and houses."

"Ah!" Lydia leaned back. "You are a *contractor*."

"That's what I said."

"This is how you support her? This is what she left her husband for?" Lydia stiffened and swayed, looked down at him. "Christ, you have sunk low."

Jean didn't know which of them Lydia was speaking to.

Alfredo looked at Jean and suddenly there was pleading in his eyes.

"I think it's time we left, Lydia." Jean carefully put down her drink. "Thanks and all."

Lydia threw her glass against the wall shattering it. "I'm sick of this! I owned him before you — then, I left him. Hector sold him to me first! Do you understand? To *me*!" She knelt before him. "Alberto. Tell me you remember me. Tell me I didn't come back for nothing."

Jean couldn't move.

Alfredo put out his hand and touched her cheek. He traced the line of her jaw, then held her head in both hands. He tilted her face toward his. Her tears were clearly visible now, hot and pouring. He looked at her closely, staring, searching her face with his eyes.

"I don't know you," he said softly and let her go.

She fell at his feet and started sobbing.

Alfredo took Jean's arm and led her out. "It's been a lovely evening," Jean said as they left.

Later: in bed.

It took her a long time to catch her breath afterward. She was covered in a light sheen of sweat that made her cold in the air conditioning. "What are you?" she asked quietly.

He did not answer.

She drew the tip of her finger down his chest. "Answer me. What are you?"

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He looked at her in the dark and she could see a glow in his eyes. "I don't know."

YOU COULD NOT call it consciousness, for consciousness determines its own needs and he could not do that. He was predetermined. He was programmed. Neither could you call him a person, for a person has a complex assortment of drives that come from many sources. His drives were simple and their source was singular.

He was a tool: intelligent, willful, resourceful. A tool aimed at a specific purpose.

Jean followed him to Cancún.

She sat in the far back section of the crowded ferry, away from him. There had been a storm the day before and though the air was clear, the resulting seas kept the big automobile ferry at dock. But the little ferry that carried only people plowed through the sea. It was close and hot aboard the boat and it stank of animals, sweat, rotten fish, diesel fumes. The sea pitched them back and forth until Jean was sure she was about to be sick. A large rip in the fabric covering the deck rails showed the bobbing horizon and she stared at it until she had the nausea under control.

Alfredo did not seem to notice. He sat on one of the benches leaning on his elbows.

When the boat docked he hailed one of the cabs and left. Jean was barely able to hail one in time to follow him.

His cab stopped just outside the Plaza Hidalgo next to the site of a new library. Alfredo stepped out of the cab and Jean didn't recognize him at first. He'd changed in the cab. His workman's dungarees and loose shirt were gone. Now, he was wearing a tie and short-sleeved white shirt and slacks. He walked over to the contractor's office, never noticing her following him. She saw him talking with the architect in rapid-fire Spanish. He seemed to be in charge of the construction. She withdrew before he could see her.

As Jean left the construction site she saw a woman sitting on the park bench across the street from the office. The woman smoked a cigarette and watched Alfredo through the office window. It was Lydia Conklin.

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Jean moved into the shade behind her to watch.

After an hour or so, Alfredo came out with a soda and sat down with the foreman to discuss some detail of the construction. Lydia put out the cigarette and crossed the street to him. He stood to meet her. They spoke for several minutes. Suddenly, Lydia raked his face with her nails — Jean could see the blood — and left him, walking hurriedly.

Jean left hurriedly, too. She had no desire to see Lydia. Jean returned to the ferry and stood on the open deck this time, smiling, watching nothing but the open sea and the frigate birds flying in the wind.

She checked her bank account in Isla Mujeres. There were several thousand dollars more than there should have been. Alfredo must have been in this position for some time. It made her laugh softly.

*He is mine, Lydia. He is mine to touch, make, and mold.*

The storm in him gradually calmed. The needs that drove him called out other needs, other traits. A sluggish thought blew through him, an inarticulate gale across the continents of what should have been a mind. It shook him. It broke the back of the incoherent storm that raged in him and let in the light. He stood blind and trembling in that light, trying to speak.

Jean awoke and he was not there.

She sat up suddenly and looked around the room. He stood, nude, on the balcony staring at the sea. The sliding door was open. She could smell the ocean through the air conditioning.

"Alfredo?"

He croaked something unintelligible.

She followed him out into the air. "Alfredo?" He was dripping with sweat. The moonlight made him glow. "Did you have a nightmare?" Ridiculous. Why would he have nightmares?

He turned to her and his face was wet with tears, the long scabs from Lydia's fingernails dark on his silver face. He shook his head, buried his face in his hands.

"What's going on?" She started toward him.

He looked at her in such pain she stepped back. "I am...."

Suddenly, Jean did not want to know. She left him and reentered the apartment. Alfredo followed her, reached out to her. She backed away. He

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was huge. He filled the room — she remembered the night in Hector's house, how strong he was. He was dark in the shadows of the room, looming over her.

"I am...," he repeated. "I am a man." He reached for her again.

Jean dodged him and ran to the other edge of the table. "Stay there."

"Jean...I have become a man for *you*."

"*Stay there! That's an order!*"

He followed her. They circled the table. Jean grabbed the scissors from the table and held them in front of her. "Stay away from me."

"Jean. I love you."

The moonlight struck his face and it was all shadows and silver. His eyes glowed for her, his face was transfigured by some secret knowledge. He leaped the table toward her and she fell back and he took her shoulders. She screamed and drove the scissors deep into his chest.

His hands fell away from her and she stumbled against the wall, staring at him.

Alfredo touched the handles of the scissors, looked at her and began to sway, caught himself, fell down to his knees. He looked at her again and full realization of what had happened seemed to touch him. He fell on his back, twitched twice, and was still.

Jean crumpled into a chair and watched the body. Finally, she pulled the scissors from his chest and washed them in the bathroom until they were clean. She drew her finger down the blades. Not sharp. Not sharp at all. But sharp enough. She smiled. She felt filled somehow. Satisfied.

Jean packed carefully and when she was done, she kissed Alfredo good-bye on his cold lips and walked down to the ferry dock. She reached the Cancún airport in time for the early morning flight to New Orleans. From there, she took a flight to Boston.

As she lay back in her seat watching the clouds move beneath her, she thought about Marc: if he had waited for her, if he had divorced her. She would like to start again with him if she could, but she would survive if she couldn't. She felt alive with possibility.

Jean fell asleep and dreamed of frigate birds circling endlessly above her.

Hector found him an hour after dawn. "Mierda," he said when he saw the blood. "That she could...." He shook his head as he opened the

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suitcase he had with him. With tools he had brought with him, he cut open Alfredo's chest and sewed the heart and lungs back together, then closed the chest cavity. From the suitcase he brought two broad plates connected to thick electrical cables and attached them to either side of Alfredo's chest. Alfredo convulsed as Hector adjusted the controls inside the suitcase. Alfredo moaned and opened his eyes.

"Good," said Hector. He detached the plates and returned them to the suitcase.

"Hector...." Alfredo shook his head from side to side. "She hurt me."

Hector watched him carefully but did not listen. He flicked two switches and watched the meters.

Alfredo sat up. "I am a man, Hector."

Hector nodded absently and adjusted his controls. "Certainly, she thought you were. Or she would never have tried to kill you. Stand, por favor."

Alfredo stood. "I am still a man."

Hector shrugged. "For the moment."

"You can't take something like that away." Alfredo clutched his hands together and looked out the window. "I must follow her."

"She doesn't want you. She's gotten what she needed."

Alfredo turned and noticed the suitcase. He watched Hector adjusting the controls. Alfredo pleaded with him. "I love her. She needs me. You can't take something like that away."

"No?" Two needles appeared on either side of one dial. Carefully, Hector brought them together.

"Hector! Don't. Please." Alfredo's hands clutched the air and his face twisted. "Please," he whispered. "You can't — "

Hector flicked a switch and Alfredo stiffened. A blank look descended on Alfredo's face.

"Of course I can," said Hector and stood up himself. "Señora Conklin? He is ready."

Lydia entered the room. "He is? Wonderful." She turned to the Mayan. "Alberto." The blank eyes turned toward the sound of her voice. "I am so glad to see you again."

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*A native of New Orleans, Jim Cambias attended the University of Chicago and lives nowadays in Massachussetts with his wife Diane and their burgeoning family. His previous stories include "The Alien Abduction" and "A Diagram of Rapture." His latest concerns an ordinary man in extraordinary circumstances.*

# Train of Events

## By James L. Cambias

SINCE THE HISTORY BOOKS all agreed that he was going to kill six hundred people on June 25, 2038, Jeremy Calder was careful to get up early that day. He had bought a new suit and gotten a haircut the day before, so he was looking pretty sharp when he left his house. The suit was a handsome dark blue wool, appropriate for funerals or causing disasters. Jeremy wore it as an act of defiance: all the pictures from the future showed him wearing a T-shirt and khakis on the big day.

When he went out to his car the little crowd in the parking lot began chanting slogans and waving signs at him. They'd started trickling in during the night, a motley collection of temporazzi, present-day gawkers, protesters, and a couple of religious types. The cops had barriers up to hold them back, but Jeremy was still startled and a little shaken at how angry some of them were. A man wearing a FUTURE CALDER VICTIM T-shirt spat on him.

The cops cleared a lane for him, but he heard a bottle thud on the roof as he started backing out. Once on the road he flipped on the radio out of

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habit. The Morning Crew on WRDU were talking about him. "In case you don't know, today's the day that Jerry Calder's going to let loose the HNE-2038 virus which makes a couple of million people sick and kills — what, a thousand?"

"Six hundred fifteen."

"Okay, so six hundred people. The question we have for our listeners is, what would you do if you were him? If you knew you were going to cause something like that? The number is RDU-CREW, or email us at amcrew@rdu.com. Let's hear what you think. Mike in Hillsborough, go ahead."

"Hey, Greg, Linda, I listen to y'all every morning. Listen, if this guy knows he's gonna cause all those deaths, why doesn't he just call in sick this morning, you know? Stay home, don't do it, man."

"Doesn't work that way," said Linda. "Isn't that what all the scientists say? You can't change the future any more than you can change the past."

"Julie on the Beltline: talk to me, babe."

"Hi, Greg! Thanks for taking my call. I guess it makes a difference if it's an accident or if he does it on purpose, right? I mean, anyone can make a mistake, right?"

"Even if six hundred people die from it?"

"Well, I'm not saying he shouldn't be punished for it, but, you know, there is a difference, right?"

"You're saying it's a question of intent," put in Linda.

"Yeah."

"Okay. Wayne in Garner, you're talking to the Crew. Wayne?"

"Hello? This guy knows what's about to happen, so if he doesn't try to avoid it, he's guilty, period. Like if you're driving on manual and somebody walks in front of your car — if you don't turn the wheel or hit the brakes, it's just like murder. I don't see why the cops can't just stop this guy, and the hell with the Supreme Court and the ACLU and everyone who says you can't arrest people before they do anything. He's guilty, put him in jail."

"Thanks, Wayne. We've got time for one more. Ali in Durham, go ahead."

"Thank you Greg and Linda for taking my call. What you have to

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understand is this man cannot change anything so he cannot be blamed. When people from the future come back to our time they are not changing things because their visit is already part of their history. I have written a book which explains how — "

"Okay, thanks, Ali. Now let's hear from Bonnie with Triangle Traffic."

Jeremy thought about calling in himself, if only to tell them he hated being called Jerry. But he decided against it; they'd probably go on to something else after the commercial, so there was no sense in drawing attention to himself. He switched over to the public radio station and turned up the volume so that he'd have a chance of understanding the mumbly announcer reading the morning news.

"...death toll of approximately six hundred twenty during the next five years, according to the Center for Disease Control. Most of the victims will be elderly. Both the North Carolina Department of Health and the U.S. Public Health Service have been conducting vaccination programs since 2026, but to date only forty percent of the people in North Carolina and less than thirty percent in neighboring states have received inoculations. According to a spokesman for the state Department of Health, the low rates are due to public apathy, since individuals who know they are not going to die from the disease are reluctant to get the shots. However, the CDC has released future records indicating a surge in vaccinations after the release of the virus, so health authorities are making sure a large supply is on hand."

Jeremy himself had gotten the shots as soon as they became available; in his more Darwinian moods he sometimes thought HNE was a good way to weed out people too damned lazy to get a free injection. They were giving them out at the malls, for crying out loud! He usually felt that way after some future victim sent him hate mail.

The car pulled off the expressway at the proper exit, and Jeremy flipped it back onto manual control for the last three blocks. Getting into the parking lot was always tricky, and today there were likely to be some extra hazards.

The Viverta Laboratories building in Research Triangle Park had once been a big expensive showpiece structure, designed by an award-winning architect and full of features that looked really nifty in all the trade

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journals even though they made life hell for the tenants. The front of the building swept around in a dramatic crescent of mirrored glass, enclosing a pond with tall fountain jets. Lawns as smooth and obsessively tended as a golf course stretched down to the edge of the highway, and a line of live oaks brought in at hideous expense marked the edges of the lot. Of course, everyone who worked at Viverta parked on the vast asphalt griddle hidden behind the building, and came and went through the loading dock. The front doors behind the fountain were opened a total of six times during the entire history of the place.

Now the place was obsolete: all basic research was being farmed out to little scientific sweatshops in Eastern Europe and Latin America, where barely-literate techs and burned-out ABDs performed ground-breaking experiments by slavishly following instructions in the papers they themselves would write. The RTP site had been sold to a company in the mushrooming interstellar industry. The future people wanted knowledge of the universe and contact with alien civilizations, so they were willing to pay big bucks to get them launched as early as possible. Drug companies like Viverta no longer needed to spend a dime on developing new products, but simply manufactured futuretech medicines under license, sometimes paying royalties to their own corporate descendants.

The prize-winning building was slated for demolition, and the contractors had already torn up half of the parking lot while the cleanup crews closed down Viverta's labs and disposed of any biohazards. Normally there were only half a dozen cars in what remained of the lot, but today it was packed with news vans, police cars, and people on foot.

The cops had prudently put up sawhorses to keep the crowd away from the door. Demonstrators were on the left, spectators and media on the right. It was hard to tell which group was more excited. The demonstrators waved signs saying things like FUTURE HNE VICTIMS and STOP CALDER NOW. One old crank with a densely-lettered sign reading "massmurdererCalderwillBURNat10000000degreesFOREVER" reached into his ratty overcoat when Jeremy came in sight, but the cops had already watched the video being recorded at that moment by the media people, and were ready to grab his gun before he could take aim.

Mr. Pettigrew met Jeremy at the loading dock. He had a serious clean fetish, which was perhaps understandable in someone who disposed of

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infectious material for a living. Pettigrew Associates had the contract to clean out the lab and make sure nothing dangerous was left before demolition, and Mr. Pettigrew had a team of thirty people on the job — mostly ex-postdocs like Jeremy eager to turn their suddenly obsolete training into gainful employment. Today he was particularly obsessive, wearing a futuretech cleansuit over his polyester knit gym teacher shirt and beltless slacks.

"I've put you on cleaning out the water samples. There's nothing contagious there."

"So are you trying to keep me from releasing the virus, or is this just a way to cover your own tail?"

"I'd send you home if I could."

"Can't do that without cause. Future knowledge doesn't matter," said Jeremy. "Chronological discrimination. Now, if you give me a day off with pay, I promise I won't sue."

Pettigrew was too cheap to do that, and both of them knew it. "Why don't you just go home?"

"I thought about it, but — " he stopped, unsure of the reason himself. Finally he laughed. "I guess I didn't want to disappoint everyone."

"Well, then I want you to do everything properly today. Full sterile procedure, full documentation, everything. And if you find anything strange, don't touch it. You're doing the Class I labs up on the third floor. Stay away from the others. I'm going to watch you all day."

"You can't stop it from happening, you know."

"I know, but it won't be my fault when it does."

They were using part of the old changing room for Viverta's clean-room techs. Jeremy hung up his new jacket, but left the tie on. He liked wearing grown-up clothes, and was quietly fascinated by things like neckties, cufflinks and suspenders. Back in grad school he had started dressing like a banker after noticing one day that everyone except the university president dressed in exactly the same outfit of jeans and T-shirts, as if some academic Taliban would stone them otherwise.

He put on his cleansuit. It was futuretech, of course — no sense risking your health on primitive twenty-first century gear. The suit was as thin and filmy as plastic wrap, but it was proof against all pathogens that would ever be known. The hood and gloves automatically sealed

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themselves onto the suit, merging to form a single, seamless unit. A tiny shoulder pack filtered the air, giving him a pure mix of oxygen, nitrogen, and water vapor.

The day's work assignments were taped to the wall next to the door. Jeremy had rooms 315 through 319 today. Mr. Pettigrew was waiting outside, and the two of them went upstairs together in silence.

Viverta had been hit particularly hard by the arrival of futuretech medicine. One morning in 2024, about a week after the Geneva team got their second timegate up and running (following instructions sent back through the *first* timegate), a present came through from the deep future — three dozen optical disks holding everything about medicine that would ever be known. The next day the doors at the Viverta labs were locked and the lights were off. They stayed that way for fourteen years while the world economy adjusted and investors stopped driving their BMWs off cliffs.

All of which meant the cleanup job was especially nasty, since some of the freezers had tissue samples or even whole fetal pigs in them. Fourteen years in a sealed freezer that wasn't running turned them into a horrible anaerobic soup, with a smell that nothing short of a futuretech cleansuit could keep out.

Happily for Jeremy, room 315 didn't have any liquid pigs to deal with. The refrigerators were full of water samples from rivers contaminated with waste from hog farms; the project running when the lab closed down had been to identify specific pathogens and devise ways to reliably sterilize the waste so that farmers didn't have to accidentally dump millions of gallons of pig sewage into the watershed every time their waste lagoons got full. (Nowadays people simply fed any kind of waste into a futuretech matter processor, which reduced everything to basic molecules and rearranged them to suit.)

According to the future histories, one of the water samples Jeremy was to dispose of contained a mutant airborne strain of swine encephalitis capable of infecting humans. With Mr. Pettigrew watching him, Jeremy pulled each tray of test tubes from the refrigerator, checked the faded label stickers against the company logs, then loaded them into the portable autoclave to be heat sterilized at 200 degrees Centigrade.

Having Pettigrew around was a real nuisance, Jeremy decided.

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Normally he could read a book or play games on his pad while one load was cooking, but with the boss watching he actually had to keep working. So he took out a second tray to begin checking labels. He slid it out of the refrigerator, turned, and ran smack into Pettigrew. The tray fell to the floor and several of the vials shattered.

"Damn!" Pettigrew backed away, brushing at the droplets on his suit.

"Will you relax already?" said Jeremy. "It's not going to happen till after lunch! Quit hovering!"

"Check it out anyway. Is it infectious?"

"I don't know! What did you think you were doing?"

"You looked like you were going to drop them!" Pettigrew kept backing up as he spoke, his eyes fixed on the mess. "What do the labels say?"

Jeremy squinted at the numbers on the stickers and compared them with the list on his pad. "It's okay. These are all control samples from Kerr Lake."

"You're sure? Could they be mislabeled?"

"Well, yes, I guess they could. You want to declare a biohazard and seal the place up? We'll have to stay in quarantine together."

"You're sure it doesn't happen this morning?"

"I read my own book! The accident's after lunch."

"Well, then, just autoclave the glass and wash down the floor with the antibiotic spray. Don't waste it — just spray where it spilled. I'm going to change."

As soon as Pettigrew was out of the room, Jeremy got out the antibiotic spray and began lavishly squirting it all over the room. It was pricey futuretech stuff, and anything he could do to cost Pettigrew money was always a plus. He used up the whole bottle. The spray was essentially an instant immune system, full of nanomachines programmed to recognize and destroy a couple of million different varieties of harmful organisms.

As he worked a cheerful thought struck him. He'd always been clumsy, always dropping things and bumping into furniture. Today's little incident with the water samples was certainly not his first on the job. Maybe the virus spill really would be just an accident.

His phone chirped. The screen showed his mother's number. "Hi, Ma."

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"Jeremy, are you at work?"

"Yes, Ma." She had that weepy note in her voice that he'd been hearing a lot lately.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Ma. Don't worry about me. Has anyone been bothering you today?"

"A man from the radio station called me this morning, and after that I turned off the phone. Did you get your shots?"

"Months ago. Don't worry."

"I got a copy of your book but I just couldn't bring myself to read it. I don't see how you can stand it, knowing what's going to happen."

"It bothers me too, Ma."

"What I don't understand is how all these people seem to think it's your fault. If they all know what's going to happen, why don't they do something, then?"

"Well, they are. Some of them, anyway. The health service is giving out the shots, the CDC has all the future info about how the virus spreads, and I think they're going to notify every victim directly. If it wasn't for people knowing about it in advance, I'm sure the virus would be a lot worse. It's just like a hurricane — they can warn people and evacuate the coast, but there's always a few idiots who get killed."

"I guess I'm just too old to understand it. Is there anything I can do for you? Are they going to take you to jail afterwards, or something like that?"

"I know I'm going to be in quarantine for a few days; I gave Miguel my house key so he can feed the cats. And then I think the FBI or someone will have me in protective custody because of all the loonies. I'll keep in touch; don't worry. The trial won't be for a year or so."

She was starting to cry again. "It's just not fair! You were always such a good boy."

"I'll be okay, Ma. I have to go now, someone's coming. Everything will be all right. I love you. Bye."

He was unloading the broken glass from the autoclave when Simon came in, all suited up. "Pettigrew said to come up and help you. Today's your big day, right?"

"Right."

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Simon got uncomfortably close and put an arm around Jeremy. "Ever think about fighting back?" he asked quietly.

"What?"

"Fighting back. Against railroading."

For a second Jeremy wondered if Simon was referring to some obscure labor dispute, and then he placed the phrase. "You're one of those Schrödinger Front guys, aren't you?"

"That's right. You know about us? That's good."

"I got a whole bunch of email from some Schrödinger people a while back, but I didn't really read most of it." He tried to ease away from Simon as politely as he could, but Simon was bigger and wasn't letting go.

"We're trying to preserve free will. Everyone knows what's going to happen, right? Only they don't. All they know is what future history says. History can be wrong."

"But, I mean, I'm going to write a book about all this. It really is going to happen to me."

"Maybe. Maybe not. You change your story, don't you?"

"Yeah. Twice, actually. At the trial and in my book I say it's an accident. Then, when I'm fifty, I say in an interview that it's all my fault and I'm responsible. But a few years after that I go back to blaming fate."

"That's good. The more uncertainty the better. Our goal in the Front is to change the way things happen and not tell anyone. Make all recorded history a lie. Jump the tracks. Then we'll be free."

Jeremy finally wriggled out of Simon's grip by spinning around and getting the autoclave between them. "You've been working here for three months just for this? You can't keep it from happening."

"I don't want to. I want to take your place."

"What? But you can't."

"Sure I can. Go wait in another room. Or sit here and keep me company. But I'll be the one to dump the sample."

"What on Earth will that accomplish?"

"You still don't see? It changes everything! If you do it, you're just riding the railroad. I'll be a free agent. History will be wrong."

"But what difference does it make? The virus still gets out, and people will still get sick. Just because you do it instead of me doesn't change anything."

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"It means people can still choose."

"Look, Simon, if it's that important to you, go ahead. I don't mind taking a break." Privately, Jeremy thought Simon was completely cracked, but if a crazy man wanted to do his work for him, that was cool.

So for the next half hour Jeremy played Zeppelin Commando on his pad while Simon autoclaved tray after tray of samples. By eleven o'clock all of Room 315 was sterilized, and the two of them moved down the hall to 317. By eleven-thirty he was on the final level of his game, evading British fighters and flak over London, going for the big prize of capturing George V, when his phone chirped again.

He checked the display, expecting to see his mother's number again. But it wasn't any phone number he recognized. That was weird — he'd been extremely careful about only giving out his pocket phone number to close friends and family. Had someone gotten greedy and passed it on to a reporter?

It peeped for the third time and Jeremy reluctantly hit the talk button. "Hello?"

"Hi, Jeremy!" It was a young woman's voice, and he needed a second to place it.

"Vera?" His expression changed from suspicion and irritation to that of a boy on Christmas morning who finds everything he asked for plus a puppy under the tree. "How've you been?"

"I'm okay. You want to get together? I'm right outside in the parking lot."

"Sure! I'm free right now. Um — can you get around to the front of the building without being noticed? Over by the fountains?"

"I think so."

"Good. I'll let you in." He turned off the phone and looked over at Simon, who was studiously ignoring him. "Will you be okay here?"

"Of course! Go ahead. Have fun."

Even covered with a decade of dust the old lobby was grand and expensive-looking. The floors and walls were greenish-white travertine with burnished stainless steel fittings. The receptionist's desk was a stone slab on steel legs in the exact center of the big room. It reminded Jeremy of a morgue table.

Vera was waiting outside alone, so he unlocked the doors. As soon as

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they were open she flung herself at him, holding him and giving him a long hard kiss with plenty of tongue action.

"Wow! I'm glad to see you, too," he said when they finally came up for air.

"Did you miss me?"

"Sure. What happened to you? I called and called but kept getting a message about your phone not being available, and after a while I figured you didn't want to talk to me."

"My grandmother got sick and I had to go out to Oregon to help take care of her."

"Oregon? I thought you were from Greensboro."

"Oh, I am. But my grandmother lives in Oregon."

"She all right?"

"Yeah. It was some kind of heart thing, but she's okay now." She gave him another devouring kiss, and he breathed in the scent of her perfume.

"How long can you stay? We could have lunch, or something."

"I'm free all afternoon," she said, and gave him a squeeze. "As long as you want. I thought you might want to be with someone who loves you today."

"I just wish this was a better time. It's been pretty rough this past week, and I'm afraid it's just going to get worse after today. After the accident I'm going into quarantine, and I don't think they'll let me have visitors."

"Wanna sneak away somewhere right now?" she whispered in his ear.

For a moment Jeremy felt like a teenager again, realizing for the first time that a girl actually wanted to have sex with him. His mouth was dry and he could hear his heart beating. He couldn't think of anything to say, so he just kissed her again, savoring the way her body felt pressed against his. His hands slipped down her back to rest on her hips.

Jeremy didn't know how long he could resist the urge to start ripping off her clothes then and there. He disengaged himself and stepped back. "Well, you're looking great. Is that the same dress you wore at the Halloween party?" It was a little frock of futuretech cloth that hugged her figure like a coat of paint and swirled with slow hypnotic patterns of color that borrowed from the surroundings. Right now it was all pale green and

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gray, with occasional streaks of bright yellow from the sunlight on the lawn outside.

"You liked it so much I made sure to wear it again."

"Even your perfume is the same." His gaze moved down to her hands, and then he saw the smudgy little orange pumpkin on the back of her left wrist. "How long has it been?" he asked, keeping his voice casual.

"Eight months."

"No. How long has it been for you? A day? You didn't even have time to wash off the hand stamp from the party."

She tried to cover the pumpkin with her other hand. "I — "

"You left the next morning, didn't you? Right after I dropped you off at UNC. You went over to the gate and jumped straight to today."

She was silent for just a moment, then smiled at him. "Okay, yes. I traveled through time to see you again."

"When are you from? You're not my great-granddaughter or something, are you?"

"No, no," she laughed. "I'm not into grandfucking. I'm near-future; my parents are probably hooking up about now. I read your book and wanted to meet you."

"So you could brag about having fucked Jeremy Calder the day he spilled the virus? Do you guys have some kind of league? How many points am I worth?"

"No, it's not like that at all! You sounded like such a fascinating person that I wanted to know you."

"If I'm such a goddamned fascinating person why didn't you bother hanging around for the past eight months? You could get to know me really well in all that time."

"I couldn't stay."

"Bullshit. If you can afford to time-hop you could buy a house, or stay in a hotel for eight months. Hell, you could've stayed at my place for free!"

"You're right. I've been completely selfish. I'm sorry. Let me make it up to you." She reached for the unseal strip on the front of his suit.

"Stop that, dammit!" He backed away. Any feelings of arousal had long since been wiped away by anger and humiliation.

"Don't you want me?" She touched a hidden seam on her dress and opened it down to her navel. "I'll do anything you want. Anything at all."

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"Go away. Go home. Go fuck some serial killer or seduce a future president. I'm not going to be stuffed and mounted on your wall."

He was halfway across the room when she spoke again, in a very different tone. "Jeremy? What you said about me living at your place — is that true? Did you really like me that much?"

Jeremy stopped but didn't turn around. "Yes. I thought I did, but I guess I was wrong. Goodbye, Vera." He stabbed the elevator button and stood there silently. Behind him he heard the door to the outside swing shut. In the elevator he stood a little numbly, trying to think of what to do next. Screw it, he decided. I'm going home.

He opened the door to 317 and stuck his head in. "Simon?"

Simon was in the middle of unloading the autoclave. He gave a start at the sound and accidentally touched the still-hot inside wall with one arm. He jerked it back quickly, but there was an awful smell of melting plastic and even from the door Jeremy could see a big red mark on Simon's arm.

"Here, quick!" He shoved Simon over to the safety shower and pulled the handle, washing his arm with tepid water and peeling away bits of melted cleansuit. The burn was pretty bad, covering the whole top of Simon's right forearm from elbow to wrist.

"I think this one is more than a first-aid kit job, Simon. You're going to need an emergency room."

"No! Not yet. Let me finish the day."

"Look, it's already starting to blister. And besides, your cleansuit's wrecked anyway."

"But — " Simon was almost in tears, and Jeremy didn't think it was just from the pain of the burn.

"There's no point in arguing. You can't work with a burn like that. Even Pettigrew would agree." He half-led, half-shoved Simon through the door and down the hall to the elevator. They found Mr. Pettigrew in his office next to the changing room. Pettigrew overruled Simon's protests and called an ambulance.

The sirens drove the crowd outside into a near panic. Both the demonstrators and the media pushed through the barricades when the paramedics hurried in, and the police were hard-pressed to keep them back.

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"It's getting ugly out there," Pettigrew observed, looking through the little window in the back door while the medics squirted anaesthetic onto Simon's burn. "You think maybe you could go out and tell them nothing's happened?"

"Me? They'd tear me apart!"

"You're the only one they'd pay any attention to. I'll go ask the police lieutenant if he'd be willing to clear a space."

While Mr. Pettigrew and the policeman talked it over, Jeremy went to the changing room and shed his cleansuit. He put on his new coat and tie again, and made sure his hair was neatly combed. He was just finishing up when Pettigrew came back looking cheerful.

"I talked him into it," he said.

"I knew you would," said Jeremy. He had seen the tape.

The police lieutenant, whose nametag read BYNUM, wanted to keep Jeremy in the loading dock, so that it would be easy to hold the crowd back. But the TV crews complained that the contrast between the bright sunlight out in the parking lot and the shadowed loading dock made it like shooting into a cave. There was some more arguing, with Mr. Pettigrew, Lieutenant Bynum, and a couple of the TV cameramen gathered in a little knot at the bottom of the steps while Jeremy sat on top of a biohazard container in the loading dock and tried to keep his suit clean.

"Okay," said Pettigrew. "I think we've got a plan here. The police are going to set up a line down at the end of the building, between the corner and that bulldozer. The light angle's good there for the TV people, and when they're all ready then you come out of the fire exit on that end. Sound good?"

"It's fine." Jeremy had to smile at Pettigrew's sudden transformation into a stage manager.

He took up his position at the fire exit with Pettigrew and Lieutenant Bynum while the media people got ready, then the three of them opened the door and stepped out. After the air-conditioned chill of the building and the ultra-pure air of his cleansuit, the atmosphere in the parking lot was like soup. He had to pick his way carefully from the fire door to the little roped-off area, because that end of the parking lot was liberally coated with red mud from the demolition equipment.

Some of the protestors who had accumulated on the fringes of the

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press conference started moving to intercept him. Lieutenant Bynum saw what was happening and muttered into his radio microphone. "Get back!" he said to Jeremy and Pettigrew, then advanced on the protestors with his arms extended in a traffic-stopping gesture.

Mr. Pettigrew turned and broke into a trot, heading for the fire door. Jeremy followed. He tried to keep from getting his good shoes all muddy, but the broken edge of the parking lot had few clean places to step. He tried to hop over a puddle, slipped, and landed sitting down in orange mud.

Jeremy got up and looked around. The cops had halted the demonstrators, and Pettigrew was already inside. He looked down. His suit was a total loss; the pants were soaked and the jacket was spattered with Carolina clay. Even his tie had mud on it. Trying to keep a little dignity, Jeremy squelched to the fire door.

"You okay?" Pettigrew pulled the door shut behind him. "I thought those crazy people were going to attack us or something."

"The cops headed them off. I fell in a puddle."

"You sure are a mess. Can't go on TV looking like that. Got any clean clothes?"

"Not here."

"I'll see what I can find for you. You can wash up in one of the empty labs."

So Jeremy peeled off his muddy suit and had an improvised bath under the safety shower in Room 160. When he finished drying himself off with paper towels, Pettigrew tapped at the door.

"Here. They're Antonio's, but he said you could borrow them." He handed Jeremy a bundle of folded clothes: a T-shirt and a pair of khakis, just like in the pictures.

"Isn't there anything else?" Jeremy asked, trying not to sound desperate.

"This is all I could find. The only other person with spare clothes is Diana. Come on, the reporters are waiting."

Moving very slowly, as if underwater, Jeremy started to put on the clothes...the awful clothes he remembered seeing in the videos from the future. The T-shirt said NICE PEOPLE SWALLOW on it in big letters.

It hit him then. There was no avoiding it. He was riding Simon's railroad now, strapped in and hurtling along. Until he put on the T-shirt,

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he had somehow hoped it might come out differently. But now it was plain: Fate wasn't even going to let him pick his clothes.

There was a solid line of cops from the fire door to the press area when he went out again, but Jeremy barely noticed. He got through the press conference by dully repeating the answers he remembered from watching the tapes. He started out by assuring everyone that the spill hadn't happened yet, urged everyone to get vaccinated as soon as possible, and expressed sympathy for all the future victims of the virus and their families.

When the cameras finally were switched off and the crowd started to disperse, Jeremy let Pettigrew and Lieutenant Bynum lead him back inside.

"You look awful," Pettigrew told him when they got back inside. "You want to go home?"

"No. There's no point in asking, is there? We know I won't."

"Well, you can if you want to. Take the afternoon off."

"If I say yes my car won't start or something. I can't afford some big garage bill."

Pettigrew followed him to the changing room and watched Jeremy put on his cleansuit, but didn't say anything more.

The crew sent out an order for lunch to the Jamaican place, and the delivery guy managed to fight his way through the crowd with their jerk chicken sandwiches and meat pies. For once Jeremy didn't join the others in the cafeteria, but ate his lunch standing up in the ultra-posh executive meeting room on the fifth floor. There was no furniture there anymore, but it had a great view across the Research Triangle Park toward Raleigh.

He wished he was one of the deep-future people. From everything he'd heard, this kind of thing didn't bother them. They got a complete set of memories the day they were born, lasting until the end of time. They switched bodies and traded memories as easily as clothing, jumping around through their own and other people's lives as nothing but disembodied viewpoints, sometimes crowding together a dozen at a time in one head for a particularly interesting experience, and skimming through unpleasant patches on autopilot. Their lives were like books, and they could skip ahead to the good parts.

After lunch he finished up the work Simon had left in 317 and moved

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on to 319. The fridge in 319 was full of groundwater samples taken at various depths in hog-farming areas. There were only three racks of vials, and Jeremy was able to destroy the first one without any trouble, logging the specimen numbers and making sure the autoclave was working properly.

By the time he finished the second rack, Jeremy was almost worried. There was only one rack of vials left, and so far he hadn't broken or spilled anything. He carefully slid the third rack of samples out of the refrigerator and carried it over to the autoclave. He logged the specimen numbers and switched the machine on. It started up without a hitch. Instead of reading or playing a game, he stood over the autoclave while it ran through the entire twenty-minute cycle.

When the timer peeped, Jeremy felt a thrilling mix of exhilaration and fear. That was the last of the samples. He was done! Somehow he had dodged the bullet! He pulled out the tray and emptied it triumphantly into the waste bin. All sterile and clean. Whistling happily he went back to the fridge for the final check.

His good mood lasted only two seconds more, for on the bottom of the refrigerator Jeremy could see a lonely little vial. He had already picked it up when he realized what it must be. The vial was unlabeled. On the fridge floor he saw a little square of yellowed paper, with some numbers scrawled on it in green pen. This was it. HNE-2038. All he had to do was put it in the autoclave and cook the little bastards to death.

The floor between him and the autoclave looked suddenly full of traps — the sloppy coil of the extension cord, a peeled-up patch of tile, a dropped pencil. Something was going to make him trip or stumble.

His cleansuit gloves were already damp and slippery with condensed steam after loading and unloading the autoclave. He took one unsteady step — it was almost as if he'd forgotten how to walk. Was his hand trembling?

Suddenly it all seemed so unfair. He'd been careful. He'd done everything properly. Now fate, or whatever it was, was going to make him fall down and break the vial no matter how hard he tried to avoid it.

"The hell with it." Jeremy threw the sample across the room as hard as he could. It bounced on the countertop, hit the steel rim of a sink, and shattered. Droplets scattered everywhere.

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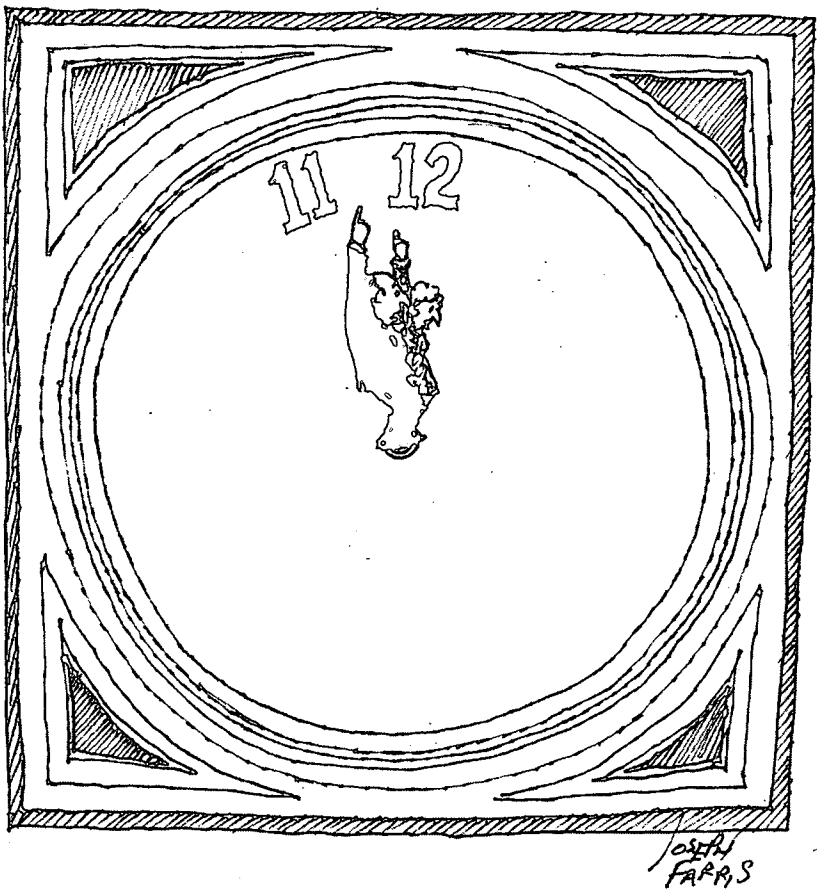
"You see?" he shouted at nobody in particular. "I did that! You didn't make me. I did it on purpose." He waited for a moment, as if expecting an answer. Then he took a deep breath and flipped on his phone.

"Mr. Pettigrew?" Jeremy's voice was calm again. "We have a biohazard emergency in room 319. I just broke the vial." He switched it off and put it back in his pocket. Then he sat down and waited. Now it was somebody else's problem.




*"Where did the time go?"*

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*Fresh from his stint as a Guest of Honor at this year's World Science Fiction convention, the one and only Ferdinand Feghoot has journeyed through time and space to return to our pages (compliments of Mr. John Varley, who says he made the mistake of letting this caper loose on the Internet a few holidays ago and has subsequently seen it return to him several times, never in the same form twice). Mr. Feghoot has not graced our pages in thirty-nine years—our time—but the chrononaut appears unchanged save for an odd bunch of pals he has brought with him.*

# A Christmas Story

## By John Varley

### With Apologies to Grendel Briarton

ON A DECEMBER TRIP to Frostbite Falls, Minnesota, Ferdinand Feghoot was summoned to the local college, Wossamotta U. by Inspector Fenwick, the Chief of Police. There he was confronted with an appalling scene. Bullwinkle, the town's leading citizen, had been smashed flatter than a kippered herring by a falling safe.

"It's a common enough means of death for cartoon characters," Fenwick opined. "Every year we lose five or six citizens to falling safes. But this time it was no accident. This time, it's murder!"

He showed Feghoot the ingenious deadfall trap rigged to rain financial ruin on an unsuspecting victim. Bullwinkle's antlers were still entangled in the tripwire. Grasped tightly in one hand was a small statue of a Hindu god.

The dead quadruped's best friend, Rocky the flying squirrel, had been with Bullwinkle at the time of his death, but when questioned by Feghoot the distraught rodent said all he could remember was seeing a rabbi fleeing

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the scene upon, of all things, a pogo stick. Fenwick immediately issued an APB for the rabbi.

"You're wasting your time, Fenwick," said Feghoot grimly, as he stood from his examination of the body. "The rabbi has been framed. When you find him, he will tell you of some elaborate ruse that induced him to be on a pogo stick at this time and this place."

"How do you know that, Feghoot?" asked the Inspector.

"This is the work of the Christmas Killer," Feghoot declared. "I have been on the trail of this fiend for years, and I fear we might never catch him. Every December he arranges one of these grisly messages. Look! Didn't you notice the smile on the victim's face? The corners of his mouth have been propped up . . . by these!" He displayed two toothpicks he had taken from Bullwinkle's mouth.

"I still don't see how you know the murderer is the Christmas Killer," said Fenwick.

"Isn't it obvious?" Feghoot asked. "Wee Vishnu, a merry crushed moose, and a hoppy Jew near."

The Ferdinand Feghoot character is used with the permission of the Reginald Bretnor Literary Estate, Fred Flaxman, owner (BretnorEstate@FredFlaxman.com).

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Luscinia megarhynchos, *that celebrated thrush, sings throughout the night to keep itself awake. Of course most people know the bird as the nightingale. M. Rickert's latest story considers one of the myths surrounding the bird, and a dark rumination it is. Whither does haste that bird when May is past?*

# The Machine

## By M. Rickert

WHEN ALL THE WORLD IS dark and the blossomed flowers have folded petals to closed bud and the butterflies sleep, and the deer, and the sheep; while bats unfurl and eat the night and frighten humans who do not like what they devour or what they are; the nightingale sings. Lovers pause in tumbled sheets and hold that song in their gaze. God smiles on us, they say, and return to embrace of limb and soul, or at least limb, and, of course, forget everything in that waking sleep of sex or love, the waking sleep of humans; children in their candy games and Pokémon hours, teenagers glued to the power of screens, TV, computer, the messy world of tactile sensation diverged. Even the old, who forget what the toaster is for but maintain a sort of creaky wisdom, if anyone would listen between the obvious confusion of words, even they, if their hearing aids are turned just right, hear the nightingale song and think, How nice, what beauty. Who remembers why? Perhaps it's best it remains unspoken. Why uproot the beautiful flower to expose its ugly source? Why remember the song's inception? Why remember anything but love, and

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joy, and, of course, e-mail addresses and where the remote control is?

High schools insist on a history prerequisite for graduation but our brightest minds are not in universities bent over papyrus and yellow-paged books, they're surfing the Web and unleashing the awesome power of space, selling the present for brighter teeth and mobile lives and what's really important here? Ghosts? Even those that drop feathers (germy, potentially full of disease) and sing golden songs in the dark? Very nice. But what's the point?

Graveyards creak with too many bones and the weight of headstones, and when the wind blows the air is dusty with the dead. Ah, life, its hoary inevitability. What's the point? Progress promises, as it always has, immortality, but for now there is only life and it points to death and after that, there are all sorts of theories, but the only thing certain is decay, the rattle of bones and dust. So who can blame us for loving the nightingale's song in the dark and forgetting the rest?

## The Story of the Nightingale's Song

Philomela and Procne are sisters who play in the grass or by the stream from a time when children played like that, with each other and imagination. But let's not get too sentimental here. Things happened then that today, in all our imperfect knowledge, we would never thrust upon a young girl. Right? For instance, once, when there was a plague of locusts, green-eyed and scrying, the Earth undulating with their greedy mandibles, a friend of theirs who bled in the corner of her house was forced out to walk amongst the insects and bleed over the crunch of them beneath her bare and horrified feet, to cast away the plague with her womanly power, which was not immediately successful, and when she returned, weeping and bitten, locusts in her hair and on her skirt, the adults swatted at her as if she were one of them, until all the locusts were corpses, and in a way she was too, her eyes like shallow water.

And there was war. Great and savage battles in which men actually saw who they killed and even had the blood of the dead on their hands and it splattered on their faces, in their beards, and it took weeks sometimes to comb it all out and the girls' father, Pandion, was in just such a war, even as they played by the stream, he fought for the reason humans still fight.

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In frustration Pandion calls for a mercenary, a great fighter who will help him to win, and Tereus takes the job and slays some men and also plots battle strategies that win the war. Tereus combs the blood from his beard with the bones of Pandion's slain, and when the other men complain he laughs, because to him, it's all the same. The dead are the dead, and that is the only victory.

Pandion thinks Tereus is like a son. A great warrior son. Come home with me, he says, we will settle payment there. You will feast with us and celebrate. Tereus doesn't really care but he is hungry and likes the sound of sleeping in a bed, though in reality this disappoints him and soon he has set up a tent on the castle grounds which everyone thinks is really funny but nobody comments on, except the girls, who are innocent, and do not understand what Tereus does for a living.

What Tereus does now is sit in the tent and sharpen his swords and watch the girls playing by the stream. Procne, the older, her hair in a braid that comes undone as she runs in her muslin, still shaped more like bones than woman, and the little one, Philomela, her red hair long and in wild disarray of grass and clover, her dress stained with green, her little girl laughter and screams larking through the meadow, and for a moment Tereus stops sharpening and something like a smile plays at his lips.

Pandion, seeing this, celebrates the obvious. It is clear what Tereus wants for payment. Tereus nods, it's true, and there's no shame in it, for there's no shame in him. When Pandion brings the wrong daughter, the older one, Procne, Tereus accepts her. What does it really matter? One thing Tereus knows is a body is just a body, one much the same as the other. Blood and bone. Skin and hair. Teeth.

What a wedding! What a feast! Roasted hummingbirds, and roasted larks. Sugared flowers and stag's blood, and twelve pipers, and mead, pomegranates, and shank of deer and lamb and cakes decorated with violets, and dancing girls, and the young bride, her cheeks red as apples, her rounded lips, her eyes all shining. All this for me? she thinks. Then glances at Tereus. He sits grinning, the great warrior, watching Philomela, a brother to her now. What did they mean, the ladies who dressed Procne, warning her of his sword's sharp thrust? He grins and claps. My husband, she thinks, I shall not fear him, he is dangerous only in war.

Well, innocence. Even now, we have our innocence. In spite of the

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worst that we know of ourselves, we still have innocence. The nightingale's song, for instance. We hear only that and forget the rest, just as generations to come will remember Columbine only as a flower.

So Procne had her innocence and it was thrust from her, given up by her father to Tereus who enjoyed it, I guess you could say. Joy may not be the right word. At any rate, they were married and the marriage was consummated. He took her to Dailus, which lay in the high pass, and she soon gave birth, in a torment of blood and pain, to Itys. She suckled baby and husband until her breasts were always sore and between these tasks she did needlework and thought often of her sister, dear, dear Philomela, who played beside the stream and pretended they were still together, while Tereus, free of battle, wandered restless through the fields, slicing wildflowers with his sword, thinking of Philomela, her glorious red hair, her little girl smile.

When Tereus leaves, unexplained, to bring Philomela to Dailus, Procne does not guess the reason for his absence but shifts Itys to the right breast and remarks to the suckling babe that whatever the reason for his departure, she is glad of it. Oh, but if only she could see her dear sister once more.

Why is it that evil is good's opportunity? If only Tereus were speaking the truth when he told Pandion that Procne missed her sister so much he had come for her. If only, as Philomela squealed with delight and packed her little sack with muslin dresses and needlework and flower garlands and colored ribbons, Tereus, who waited in the hall with Pandion, was thinking of bringing Philomela to her sister, of Procne's smile, instead of Philomela's pretty lips. If only he were interested in happiness.

Philomela is going on a journey! Philomela is going to see her sister. Good-bye Nurse. Good-bye Cook. Good-bye little dog. Good-bye birds. Good-bye Papa, good-bye. Good-bye house. Good-bye stream. Good-bye meadow.

Good-bye everything she ever was and dreamt of, though she does not know this as Tereus helps her to his horse, and wraps his great arms around her. Good-bye innocence. Good-bye.

Somewhere between Pandion's castle and Dailus it happens. He takes her into the forest where she chats happily as she picks flowers for her sister until Tereus pushes her to the ground and rapes her. How much

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should be described? The sky was blue with two fat clouds, one in the shape of a bird, the other like a sleeping dog. The ground was bumpy and a sharp stick jutted in her back. The sun shone through the leaves, that dappled color, as if she were a fish in the stream. There was one flower just near enough to observe closely, purple lips and a red center, the green stem bent slightly, a tiny white bug on the second leaf. When Tereus is finished he is not completely satisfied. This girl talks too much. He cuts out her tongue and casts it into the brush. She screams and bleeds and weeps. He salves the wound with curing plants he stuffs in her mouth and then, he rapes her again. The birds sing, the horse paws at the ground, a chipmunk twitters in a tree, a squirrel scurries past but she is silent. When he removes the curing leaves the bleeding has stopped. He mounts the horse, pulls her up in front of him. They continue on their journey to Dailus.

Why remember? Why tell this tale of horror? Why does evil happen? Why does it happen so often to children and what does the nightingale have to do with this tongueless child, this evil act, this sister with Itys at her breast who, like his father, never seems satisfied?

Tereus brings Philomela to Dailus but he does not bring her home. Rather, he brings her to his house in the country, where he locks her in a room. He hires good servants who are comfortable with keys, and unquestioning of tongueless, imprisoned girls, to bring her food and water, silks and threads to keep herself busy in between him until at last he leaves. She watches him from the window as he rides away on his horse, she watches his great arms and broad back recede to a dot until he is gone and then she begins stitching, a picture story of sorts. When words are taken, what remains?

She sends back the trays of bread and cheese, meat and fruit. The cook frowns at the empty water bowl. What will happen if the prisoner dies while the master is gone? It is clear that is not his intention. Next meal the cook prepares roasted quail stuffed with chestnuts and sliced apples dipped in honey and a bowl of sunflower seeds and millet. This time when the tray is returned the roasted quail remains untouched, the chestnuts still golden in the bird's cavity, the sliced apples are brown and there are two flies in the honey but the sunflower-millet bowl is empty except for a small stitched cloth of a red-haired girl smiling and this is the first time anyone, ever, has given the cook a present. The next day Philomela's tray

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has four bowls of sunflower seeds and millet and even a little flower which is meant as a decoration, but comes back with a crushed appearance as though Philomela had thrust it to her lips for its nectar, so the next day the cook sends several flowers and six bowls of sunflower seeds and millet and all the flowers come back crushed, and five of the bowls empty, and in the corner of the tray is a small square of fabric stitched with the picture of a sun, even though the day is rainy. The cook puts the fabric into her apron pocket and imagines collecting dozens of them and stitching them into a quilt.

And perhaps that's what would have happened, if that was all there was to Philomela's needlework, but in her lonely little room she stitched the sad story of the girls playing, a wedding, the red-haired girl alone, the groom's return, the girl with him on the horse, the flowers she was picking, the man astride the girl, the knife near her throat, the tongue held up, the girl weeping, the house in the country, the window with the girl sitting in it, sewing. This she wrapped in a muslin dress and tied with ribbon and addressed to her sister, returned on the tray with another package for the cook, who paid a messenger boy from her own savings to deliver the package safely and then unwrapped hers, a lovely shawl stitched with daisies which she took to wrapping around her shoulders at night, in her lonely little room off the kitchen, and even if no one saw, and it didn't make sense to wear it, she loved to do this, and it became her favorite time of day, though never, for even one moment, did it occur to her to free the girl.

When Procne receives the package, she recognizes the muslin dress it is wrapped in and unfurls the ribbon eagerly. Itys sleeps, a rare occasion, and Tereus has gone to work, so for Procne this is a moment of peace, and now this missive from her sister, a moment of joy. She unfurls the ribbon, shakes out the cloth, and reads the pictures in horror. She understands every unspoken word, every stitch. She recognizes the little house in the country, not even a day's distance. She brings Itys to the wet nurse, who secretly moans when she sees the greedy suckler and his mother approaching. Then Procne mounts her horse and rides to free her sister, her little tongueless sister, who used to sing and chat so happily. Procne rides and plots endlessly. Revenge.

The human need for balance. Restitution. The endless accounting of

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gain and loss. The urge to unburden the evil act, return it to its source. What to do for the tongueless girl?

When Philomela hears the horse approaching she weeps in the corner of her room, she curls up into herself, like a little bird, her head beneath her arm, her bony elbows jutted out, she tries to make herself smaller and smaller as the footsteps approach and the keys rattle. When the door opens she does not look until she hears, no, it cannot be, but yes, she hears her sister's voice. "Philomela," her name lovingly spoken. She raises her face of tears and sees Procne, her dark hair wild from the ride, her purple gown all wrinkled, just as she used to be in the meadow, by the stream. Behind her stands the cook, her white pasty mouth open, the ring of keys in her doughy hands.

"Oh, sister, dear sister." Procne bends to embrace her and Philomela flinches but then remembers who is with her and leans into the loving arms. Procne holds her and thinks how weightless she has become, as if her tongue was what held her to the Earth. She carries her out of the room and down the stairs and out the door to a horse, saddled and waiting as ordered. This she mounts with Philomela before her, a tiny package, a little girl, a living wound. She gallops off leaving only dust and the cook who dabs her eyes and wipes her nose and goes back inside to her pot of onion soup.

Procne brings Philomela to her house. Not their father's, but who can blame her for this choice? After all, it is their father who gave them to Tereus, yes, innocent of his evil intentions, but perhaps he should not have been so gullible. It is clear this matter rests in their hands. Tereus is still away, killing the enemy, no that's not right, Procne amends, Tereus is still away killing. It is hard to remember that he has no enemy, only those he is paid to kill and those he is not, and they are interchangeable. Whatever was her father thinking to give her to such a man?

Procne retrieves Itys from the wet nurse and he immediately cries and grabs at her breast. She unlaces and lets him suckle greedily. Philomela flits about the room and shakes her head at the various plans of revenge Procne offers until at last, in exasperation, Procne says, "Well, what?" Philomela raises one small white hand and points at Itys who suckles with wide open eyes the color of his father's. Procne looks down at him and finds the answer to the question she most often thinks when he is

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suckling, will this never end? Will he want me with his teeth? She looks up at Philomela, who stands beside the fire, and she nods. Yes. Itys.

When news arrives of Tereus's return, Philomela hides in a great basket in the corner, curled up as if in a nest, and Procne turns the roasted meat on the spit, well done, they thought he'd return sooner, but this isn't really about appetite anyway.

He roars into the house, the great beast of a man. Dried blood still clings to his beard and eyebrows. He is hungry and lusty and says he will eat, then have her and then, he thinks, he needs some time in the country. She feeds him the roasted child. He devours it...innocently. When done, he pats his full stomach, undoes his belt, and this is when Philomela rises from the basket and he realizes he's been found out. But oh well, he's still the master and lord of this house. Then Procne tells him.

"You just ate Itys."

He roars. He reaches for the fire ax and chases the two sisters whose victory seems rather short. They are weeping and he is screaming. The gods see this and decide it must be put to a stop. Why now, and not sooner? Where were they when he raped Philomela in the woods? Where were they when he cut out her tongue? Where were they when Itys reached for his mother's breast and she unsheathed the knife instead? Where are they most of the time? But at last they stop it, with a wave of godly hands. Tereus is changed to a hawk, Procne a swallow, and Philomela a nightingale. Later, the child's bones are found by the cook who unwittingly feeds them to the dogs. She thinks they have all gone to the house in the country and the cook there, wrapped in her daisy shawl, and fingering the fabric stitched of a smiling girl, thinks they all remain in town, and the hawk swoops down to catch a gopher, the swallow flies to Capistrano, and the nightingale discovers, on one dark and starry night, that she can sing, so she does.

At close, the questions remain. Why do people hurt each other? Is evil someone born, or something between us, something ephemeral that grows in circumstance that allows it? Why do girls and women, even today, in our modern and knowledgeable world, suffer rape and mutilation? Why does anyone suffer? And what does fable, myth, story have to do with these important questions, certainly worthy of a search on the

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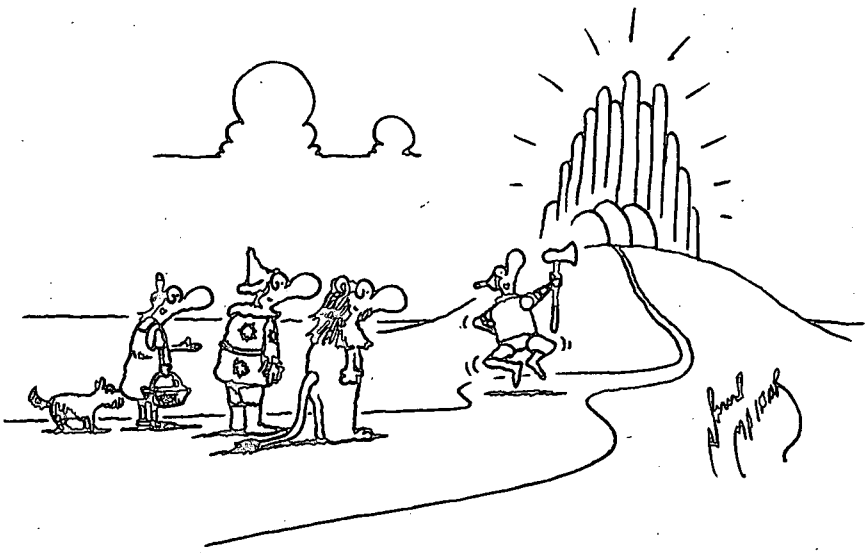
Web in between those auction sites where there are some really good deals, and at least the questions are real and the merchandise is real, even movies are real, sort of, because they have real people in them at least, but fictional? What's the point? Everyone knows a bird is just a bird, a song is just a song, a story just a story. Why pretend it means anything?

How do stories help us solve the terrible riddle of being human? How do we take all our human suffering, the rapes, and wars, and children dying, and turn it into something like a bird song in the night? How do we become better than we've been? And how do we get from here to there, when the gods seem so reluctant to help? Could it be, even they don't know the answers?

Maybe inquiry isn't what we need. Maybe the more we pick at the fabric of our beliefs, we find how fragile it all really is, and how there's nothing behind the cloth except empty space, an infinite sky that cannot support the gravity of our assertions, how weightless we become without them. Maybe it's better not to think about that.

Maybe it is just enough to know the nightingale was once a wounded child, and that when all the world is dark, she sings.



*"He just found out his HMO would pay for the new heart."*

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# PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

## PAUL DI FILIPPO

### *Prose by Any Other Name Would Smell as Sweet*

"LIKE MANY little-known authors, Janis Jaquith often wishes that some of the people buying best sellers would pick up her book instead. Now the online retailer Amazon.com is giving her a chance to express those feelings.

"Two weeks ago, Amazon's Web site added a feature that lets users suggest that shoppers buy a different book than the one being perused, and Ms. Jaquith, the self-published author of the memoir *Birdseed Cookies*, has taken full advantage...."

—*The New York Times*, May 5, 2002.

I was dreading work today. The Mittleschmerz contract needed a final revision, and my boss, Sandy Fleabane, was riding my tail hard to get it done. So as I endured my commute into Manhattan on the packed LIRR train, I tried to forget my troubles by immersing myself in the latest Keene Dunst book, *Fear of Terror*. It took me a while to get back into the novel. It wasn't quite as good as Dunst's last one, *Deathly Living*, or the one before that, *Suspicion of Mistrust*, or even the one before that, *Life Amidst Death*. But after a while, I found myself lost in Dunst's technically adept prose, glad to have put aside my worries thanks to a somewhat engaging book.

A few stops before the city, my seatmate got off and I moved my briefcase into the empty seat, hoping that no incoming passenger would claim it. Having the extra space would have been another small comfort in my harried day. But of course, the way my luck was running, not only did a new passenger, a woman, quickly zero in on the seat, but she was carrying an enormous clunky duffel bag. When I saw she was intent on sitting next to me, I sighed and removed my briefcase from the empty seat. She plopped down with her load,

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banging my knee in the process. The duffel held something hard-edged, and it hurt.

"Ow!"

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry!"

Although pretty and dressed conventionally enough, the woman looked a little ditzy and I didn't want to start a conversation with her. So I simply said, "No problem," very cursorily, then tried to return to my book. But she wasn't letting me off so easily.

"Are you sure you're okay? Perhaps you should go to the lavatory and see if I bruised you. Maybe get some ice from the café car for it?"

Well, my knee *was* throbbing, and I thought it couldn't hurt to have a look. "All right. But I assure you, even if I do develop a little bruise, it's really inconsequential."

She smiled. "Still, I'd feel so much better if you checked."

I laid my book down on my seat and went to the lav. When I returned, I was able to reassure the woman that my knee seemed fine.

"I'm so relieved!" she gushed.

I smiled wanly and tried to shield myself from any further conversation behind my book. But immediately I encountered something that baffled me. The Keene Dunst novel no longer resembled what I had been reading. The text was completely different. Mistrusting my own senses, I looked at the dustjacket, then the pages, then the dustjacket again. The incongruity between package and contents was baffling.

During this inspection, my new seatmate, contrary to her earlier effusiveness, tried to hide behind a copy of *The New York Times Book Review*.

Finally I had an inspiration. I removed the dustjacket and examined the spine of the book. There I read an unexpected legend: *Paper Poppies*, by Barbara de Seville.

"What's this now?" I demanded, turning to the woman. "Have you switched my book with another one?"

She set down her tabloid shield. "Me? Of course not! Why would I do a crazy thing like that?"

I had no way of disproving her claim of innocence. Still, who else could have played such a trick...?

"Well, did you notice anyone messing with my book while I was away from my seat?"

"Yes, now that you mention it, I did. He was a tall Hispanic man with a Zapatista mustache and a limp — "

Just then her cellphone rang. "Hello, Barbara de Seville here, Alternative Author Project — "

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"Ah-ha!" I snatched the cellphone out of her hand and cut the connection. "It *was* you then!"

Caught red-handed, Barbara de Seville put up a bold front. "All right, I admit it. I took your horrid piece of bestseller trash and replaced it with a heartfelt, winsome, slice-of-life, coming-of-age memoir. At least that's what *The Chicago Mercantile Intelligencer* said about it. Instead of berating me, you should be thanking me!"

"Thanking you? For stealing my book?"

"Oh, come now, I merely substituted something of equal or greater value. Monetarily, you're no worse off. And as far as entertainment value, your experience has been greatly enhanced. Trust me! Can't you see that I'm trying to broaden your tastes and literary experience? Surely you didn't really want to be reading that awful *Dunst* book, did you?"

"Why would I have bought it if I didn't want to read it?"

"Because you've been brainwashed! You and all the other poor deluded readers whose collective purchases constitute the immense sham that is the bestseller list! You've never been exposed to the marvelous alternatives that are out there. Wonderful books composed of the authors' blood, sweat, and tears which go begging for readers."

The image of books dripping precious bodily fluids repelled me for a moment, but then I started to consider Barbara's argument. Perhaps I hadn't really invested much thought in acquiring the latest Dunst book. What had once been a real consumer choice based on past enjoyment had become a mere habit leading to boredom and stultification.

As if sensing that I was weakening, Barbara pressed her case. "All I'm doing is engaging in a little guerilla marketing. As a businessman yourself, surely you can understand about positioning your product where consumers can find it. And this is not about just *my* book. I'm striking a blow for all unsung authors everywhere!"

My innate cynicism came to the forefront. "Oh, really? Then why didn't you slip me a copy of someone else's book, and not your own?"

Barbara blushed. "Well, I only get the author discount on multiple copies of my own title...I'm not as rich as Keene Dunst, you know! If *Paper Poppies* really takes off, then I'll expand to other authors. I have a friend who's written this exhilarating tale of sisterhood. Belle Kerve, *Sistahs and Mistahs* — "

Barbara's sincerity had won me

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over, at least partially. "Okay, what if I'm willing to give your book a try? Can I get my Dunst back if I don't like yours?"

"Certainly!"

"All right then. I'll give it a shot."

"Wonderful! Here, let me autograph it! What's your name?"

I told her. As she signed my new book, I took the chance to look her over more closely. Somehow she didn't look so ditzy anymore.

"Let me get you a real dustjacket to go with that." Barbara unzipped her duffel, revealing a few dozen copies of her book.

"What are your plans once you're in the city?" I asked.

"Oh, not much. I'm going to hang out at Bryant Park and Washington Square, wherever I'm likely to find people reading. Then I'll pull a few more switches, just like I did on you."

"Isn't that awfully tricky, all by yourself?"

"Oh, yes. You wouldn't believe how many times I've almost been caught. Having a confederate would make things easier, but most of my friends are home writing." Sizing up my new interest, Barbara said, "Want to help?"

Ditching the Mittleschmerz contract and Sandy Fleabane was an easy call. But I had to think a little longer about hanging out all day in Bryant Park. Finally I proposed an alternative.

"Let's get the train to Coney Island. This year's beach books are a bunch of stinkers." ☙

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*Mr. Cowdrey's last New Orleans story was "The Boy's Got Talent" in our September issue. "Grey Star" brings us back near the Gulf of Mexico, but this time with more serious and more moving results.*

# Grey Star

## By Albert E. Cowdrey

WHAT A DAY! SARAH thought as she passed through the gilded doors of the Win or Lose Casino into the buzz and flicker of a blazing neon marquee.

Waiting for Burke to bring the car, she paced back and forth on a concrete apron covered with crimson carpeting. The night had turned restless. Rain had fallen; the carpet was sopping and pools on the causeway were reflecting the frenzy of the lights.

Gusts of warm wind off the Gulf of Mexico fanned her short-cut blonde hair, and she brushed it back with one hand — capable, strong, no polish on the nails — a workman's hand, only smaller. Raising her head to emphasize her long smooth neck, thrusting her big bosom just a bit forward, she posed unconsciously, like a cat, not to make others look at her but to fulfill her own image of herself.

At the other end of the causeway, a thousand lighted windows outlined the Hotel Grandview, and her thoughts slipped back to the morning, the dim beige light of a room where she'd had some really, *really*

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good sex with Burke. How did Mae West put it — a hard man is good to find?

She had so many memories of him; when she was alone she fingered them like a miser counting coins.

Their first meeting in the ER of the New Orleans Hospital Center. It was the first day of her residency in emergency medicine and she was, let's face it, scared to death when a male patient, for no visible reason, started turning blue. Burke was passing by, and without a word grabbed a breathing tube and slid it down the guy's throat through the epiglottis into the trachea with one deft turn of the wrist. Then gave her a wink, and moved off about his duties.

And what profound thought had passed through Sarah's mind? *I've heard that forty percent of male nurses are gay. Does that mean that sixty percent of them aren't*? Even today, she felt rueful about that. Banality didn't go with her image of herself.

The Saab pulled up. Burke's broad freckled face grinned at her and she jumped in.

"Be raining like hell later on," he opined.

"Well, take I-10. It's the quickest."

"Uh-uh," he said. "Driving that goddamn road would put me to sleep fast."

True, the interstate was hypnotic, a concrete arrow flying through a tunnel of pines. But Sarah frowned. She liked to think she hated the hospital caste system, with docs issuing orders to RNs like Burke who knew more than they did. In fact, she issued orders even at home in their condo, and was always somewhat shocked when he ignored them.

What had her therapist warned her against — letting her free-floating anxiety turn her into a control freak? Believing nobody could do anything properly unless she told them how? With some effort, she took a deep breath, composed her cameo profile that she kept ivory-pale, even on the beach, with layers of sunblock.

Outward calm defends against inward impulse. Right.

A strong gust struck and the car shimmied, the tires squeaking a little. A tremor also ran through the causeway, as if the Las Vegas outfit that built the casino hadn't been up on the problems of construction on an oozy continental shelf. But Burke, driving as usual with two strong stubby fingers, seemed to control the car without effort.

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At the end of the causeway a red light had gotten stuck. Creeping past was the impacted traffic of the Strip, a slow river of steel and lights. Burke flashed his grin at a startled driver in the eastbound lane, slipped between two SUVs, touched the brake to let an eighteen-wheeler thunder past, spun the wheel, slid into an opening only a bit longer than the car — and there they were, heading west.

"How do you *do* that?" Sarah demanded, but got only a wink in return.

God, the man lives by his reflexes, she thought. How odd of me to fall in love with an animal — I don't think he thinks at all. Even sitting still he radiated energy, and she relaxed, warming herself at the fire.

Ignoring garish lights, a patter of rain, Tom drifted through the empty halls and emptier rooms of the Grey Star Hotel. The Sun & Buns Motel existed in a perpetual glare of neon, and chains of reflected light from the swimming pool danced across shadowy walls and ceilings.

He made a conscious effort not to hate the squealing kids and their beefy parents, taking a final dip before bedtime. After all, he'd been a kid here too — though it was a long, long time ago.

Daddy owned the Star, and Tom couldn't remember a time when he hadn't played and worked here. When he was eight or nine years old, he'd been earning nickels running errands for seersucker-clad gents who sat in green rocking chairs on the downstairs gallery. They called him Short Stuff and wanted lemonades brought to them, or juleps, or cigarettes, or matches; their wives sat beside them, wearing wide straw hats and summer dresses of pale linen. The ladies wanted things too, only they called him Honey and usually didn't tip him at all.

In those days people swam in the Gulf, not in chlorinated pools, and the water wasn't polluted, or if it was it didn't seem to bother anybody. Summer began in May, and by June Tom's initial sunburn had peeled off. By July he was brown as a pecan shell and living like an amphibian — half in, half out of the water every day. Christ, he could still smell those days, half briny water, half piney woods. Pale heat haze gathered on the horizon, grasshoppers chirruped in the brown grass, mirages danced on the white roads.

At night when the Gulf was smooth as mercury under a summer

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moon, Daddy put him to work carrying pitchers of ice water up the long curving stairs. He remembered the hot little rooms, the black electric fans rattling and turning, men lolling in their BVDs and handing out more nickels that felt greasy, passing from one sweaty palm to another. And the women, in straining bras or filmy nighties, with no bras at all....

Meals had been serious rituals — breakfasts with the sweet toasty smell of pancakes and bitter black steam from the big silver coffeepots, the waiters hefting trays with dishes under silver covers, the chink and rattle of metal and china competing with the hum of conversation and the muted roar of cyclone fans. Ample luncheons, spread out on long tables, and more ample dinners. The business of calling in Rotunda, the cook — yes, her name really was Rotunda, and she lived up to it — to take credit for the meal.

He remembered her standard joke, kept in reserve for the inevitable lady who would say, "Oh, Rotunda, what *do* you put in your gumbo to make it so good?"

"Black fingers!" Rotunda would snap, and the whole room would break up in laughter....

The kids at the Sun & Buns were squealing loud tonight. Tom sighed; sometimes he felt he had very little to say anymore, except a sigh. He moved through another empty room, past the shimmer of a mirror (or the shimmer of a memory?) on the wall, out onto the upper galley. In the far distance, mounted on the sands of what had been Pelican Island, the ziggurat of the Win or Lose Casino flashed and glittered across the black water, where once there had been only the little lights of spear fishermen, bobbing and winking.

Why hang around? he wondered for the *n*th time. The world he knew wasn't coming back, nor most of the people, not after the deadly year when Hurricane Dolores had finished them. What was he waiting for? Did he go on clinging to memories because so little else was left?

Sadly, he felt the waste of his energy, the way it drained away, a little every day. He looked out toward the dark Gulf but could see nothing, not even the shape of death, though he had seen that once coming ashore from its home in the deep sea, where shifting white sand polished forever the bones of the lost.

* * *

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The Strip fell behind, with its parade of towering hotels, ice-cream-colored condos with sapphire pools, seafood restaurants with flashing neon crabs and flounders. The Saab gained speed, plunging after its headlights into the darkness of coastal suburbia.

Sarah snuggled against the leather of the bucket seat. It *was* nice along here, driving down an avenue of oaks. To the left, the Gulf's long creamy curves of breakers assaulting the sand. To the right, endless bungalows with lamps glowing in the windows, and just occasionally a small off-the-beaten-track motel that catered to families with more kids than money. Half asleep, Sarah seemed to catch a glimpse of an old plantation-style building, and that surprised her — she'd thought Hurricane Dolores had destroyed all the old places.

"There's Dad's church," she murmured, pointing, and Burke said, "What?" and then dutifully, "Oh, yeah. The church. I'm glad you brought me there, Honey."

The cameo profile never changed, but she wondered briefly why she *had* brought him there. He'd wanted to go to Cozumel for their vacation, but no, the coast it had to be. Sarah had pitched it on the joys of gambling and seeing the Cirque du Soleil, knowing how he loved anything with color and movement.

Actually, she had reasons of her own. Deep reasons, hardly to be put into words — wanting him to understand her, to know who she was and how she came to be. Somehow, that part of the program hadn't worked too well.

Oh, Burke had said all the right things while they stood, hand in hand, in the ugly new church with the cheap stained glass and the varnished pine pews. He didn't believe in religion any more than she did, but he felt at home in a redneck cathedral. Gazing at the memorial plaque Mama had put up, the small white bas-relief copied from an old photograph, and the inevitable stupid motto, in this case *The Spirit Giveth Life.*

Sure it does.

Burke comforted her when she wept and listened patiently to the story of how Mama survived the hurricane, losing everything — absolutely *everything* — but her life in the process. How she'd found a job as a records clerk in the Hospital Center; how in time she'd somehow gotten together the money to put her daughter through LSU Medical School before trailing off, far too young, into the mist of Alzheimer's.

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Burke had listened, had sympathized, had not really understood. She could almost hear him confronting Fate with his small store of functional commonplaces: Death and madness, that's really tough; still, everybody's got troubles; you help out when you can and otherwise forget it. Brooding drives you nuts, and what good does that do, anyway?

He was such a simple beast, really; not dumb, but simple. She clung to his simplicity as a rock in a troubled world. Yet at the same time it sent her up the wall, because there were things, important things, that he just *couldn't see.* Such as the fact that she had imbibed, almost literally with her mother's milk, the sense that life hangs by a hair — always.

Her therapist had chided Sarah for living always with "a sense of the presence of death." But Sarah didn't see that as an illusion; death *was* ever-present. If the therapist doubted it, she should spend Saturday night in an emergency room.

"Oh, shit," said Burke quietly.

Sarah believed that if a large asteroid plowed into the Earth — which wouldn't surprise her in the least — Burke would say the same thing. Not even with an exclamation point. Just, "Oh, shit."

"What is it?"

For answer he spun the steering wheel. The Saab cornered, not exactly on two wheels but squealing, and shot through a channel in the median that Sarah hadn't even known was there. Burke floored the accelerator and there they were, hauling ass back toward the casino.

"WHAT IN THE HELL?" she demanded, when she'd caught her breath.

In the reflected light of the dashboard he spared her a grin and said, "Sorry," in a tone that meant he wasn't sorry at all.

It was that porcelain serenity of hers — like a boy, he just had to make it crack. On the gift he'd given her last Christmas, the card had read, "For my FPMD, Love, Burke." That, he explained, meant Fucking Perfect Medical Doctor. The porcelain had cracked then, too.

Now he said, "I left my checkbook in the safe at the hotel. And don't tell me I'm dumb because I know it already."

"No, Honey, I wouldn't say you were dumb. Idiotic, maybe."

They roared back toward the fizz and sparkle of the Strip, while Sarah tried hard to return her face to its customary cool perfection.

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* * *

Somehow the emptiness of the Grey Star's rooms was the hardest thing for Tom to take.

So much had been lost that night in August 1969, when Dolores came ashore. The acres of white linen, the scarred but still serviceable bedroom suites that Daddy had always called suits, thousands of pieces of cutlery, hundreds of burnished pots from the kitchen, a glittering wealth of glassware.

But that was only the superficial loss. More painful were the personal things — like the photo albums that recorded his parents' lives and his own. The mother he hardly remembered, drowned in a boating accident when he was six. Daddy posing as a fisherman, as a grinning host with long-forgotten guests, as a pillow-stomached Santa Claus. Pictures of Tom himself, in scout uniform with his troop, in swimming trunks with a hammerhead shark he'd landed when he was sixteen.

Pictures of girls, plenty of them. His whole love life had been bound up with the Grey Star. At fourteen he'd lost his cherry in Room 203 — afterward, he seldom passed it in the hall without a quick grin — with a chambermaid named Betty Lou Something, of whom he remembered little but the feel of her heels in the small of his back and the fact that her mouth tasted of spearmint gum.

There'd been others. By his late teens he'd learned to identify at a glance those female guests for whom the phrase "room service" had a special meaning. From a brief stint in the army after Korea he'd returned to the hotel with broadened shoulders and perfected technique. He could see himself now, striding through the halls, eyes bright and dick half-hard, a few packs of Fuck-A-Duck rubbers in one pants pocket and a jar of cold cream in the other. Hotel, hell. When he was warm and twenty-something, the Grey Star had been a garden of delights.

Then responsibility fell on his shoulders. Daddy, taking an early-morning dip in the Gulf, trod on the spur of a stingray, went into toxic shock, and drowned a hundred yards from shore in water only three feet deep. Suddenly the all-day, almost all-night business of running the hotel was Tom's problem, and he began to look for a partner.

How surprising that he'd been sensible enough to pick a neighbor and high school friend, Madge Conroy, who was not taken in by his redneck

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ladykiller ploys. Even now, hovering on the upper gallery and gazing into empty rooms, Tom remembered ruefully just how deftly she could deflate him, and his own surprise at how little he resented it. Maybe he'd simply had enough randy twits by that time and at last wanted a real woman with common sense and strength and, yes, a bit of cunning.

For she did want him, she wanted to marry him and be the mistress of the Grey Star, the local version of the Grand Hotel. What a surprise to find out that was what he wanted, too — to find himself deciding at last to stop being a happy asshole and grow up.

Tom had actually been fetching up the ghost of a smile, remembering Madge, when the thought of how short a time they'd had together wiped it away and returned him to his customary dismal rut.

All roads lead to Rome. All paths, if you follow them long enough, to sorrow. Of that at least he felt sure.

THE DESK CLERK at the Hotel Grandview demanded four pieces of ID, then returned Burke his checkbook and unbent sufficiently to warn him and Sarah that NOAA had put this part of the coast under a tornado watch.

"Maybe we should stay the night," Burke suggested.

"No, I'm on call tomorrow."

"Edwards can take it for you."

"He's not good enough."

Burke had his mouth open to say, "He's as good as you are, maybe better," but then closed it. There were limits to what even he could say to her.

There she stood, face as placid as a glass of cold buttermilk, and inside all those little devils warning her that unless she saw to *everything*, nothing would get done, or at least wouldn't get done right. Burke had never in his life known anxiety of this loose, unfocused, random kind — this fear that went in search of something to justify its own unease.

Well, that was Sarah for you. He'd laugh her out of it when he could, and otherwise put up with it. Some people had problems with their nerves, some didn't — that was all.

"Okay, then, let's go," he said. Do it or don't do it, shut up and get moving: Burke's mantra fit all circumstances.

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So they repeated their earlier drive westward through the traffic of the Strip, this time with lightning starting to flicker and the sounds of heavy surf just audible over the hum of wheels.

Of course, the fact that Madge got pregnant had been crucial to their decision to marry. The early BC pills hadn't been all that reliable...or had she, just possibly, skipped the pill in hopes of jogging him to a decision?

They were starting the planning phase when a rather ordinary hurricane named Dolores wandered into the Gulf of Mexico. At first they paid no attention; he and Madge had both grown up on the coast and thought of hurricanes as one more annoying fact of nature, like humidity or sandflies.

They were still debating their wedding, hung up between the expense of a church ceremony and a quickie civil splicing — maybe with a flight to Vegas thrown in, only then who would run the Star in their absence? — when the storm, sucking energy from the gumbo-warm Gulf water, exploded into a monster.

It headed for New Orleans, and they both felt sorry for the city, still recovering from Hurricane Betsy four years earlier. But hurricanes were unpredictable beasts, and Tom urged Madge to visit her relatives in Natchez until it was over.

"Not unless you come too," she said.

Tom had no intention of going anywhere; the Grey Star needed him, and it was a strong old building that had shrugged off dozens of storms in the past. So, instead of running, they planned a hurricane party, inviting friends and laying in a good supply of bourbon and gin and candles and kerosene.

Tom and the waiters spent a day tacking plywood over the windows and testing the bolts on the long louvered shutters that opened on the galleries. Then he sent the whole staff to their homes, where they were also needed. He was glad that everyone had behaved so responsibly and worked so hard when Dolores veered suddenly and headed for the coast.

He and Madge awoke that morning to greenish filtered light, the rattle of sashes, the hoarse breathing of the wind. They went outside on the upstairs gallery and stared out to sea. The horizon had already vanished and the steam of August had blown away on burly gusts that pounded the shutters and made the plywood flex.

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As the morning advanced their guests arrived, shedding wet slickers and talking extra loud to be heard over the howl and creaking of the storm. Tom and Madge took a last walk, leaning into the wind, their clothes plastered to their bodies in front and flying like pennons behind.

The Gulf was already topping the seawall, and rain and spray mixed together stung their faces and the taste of salt seeped between their lips. Royal palms lined the drive, fronds rattling, and they clung to a trunk and gazed enraptured at the gray waves tossing white manes like wild horses.

Back inside, two guests had to help them push the heavy door of the hotel shut. Tom bolted it top and bottom.

"This storm'll be a good one," he promised, and went off to the empty kitchen to dish up scrambled eggs on the long black range the staff called Old Smokey.

Rotunda's pots were swinging erratically from hooks, clanging and clashing randomly like wind chimes for the tone-deaf. Tom stopped and frowned; windows and shutters and plywood were all tight. He had no feeling of movement, and yet — could the building itself be quivering?

This time there was no bantering between Sarah and Burke.

Both were thinking of the things that had delayed them so long after they left the hotel this morning — visiting the church, taking that last fling at the casino, the way the slots paid off for a while before betraying them, Burke forgetting his checkbook...they should be home by now, resting up for tomorrow.

Instead, he was driving with two hands because the alternations of gust and lull made the car shudder. He was driving slower, too, because pools had gathered on the road, and he didn't want to hydroplane. Rain drummed on the roof with erratic fingers.

Sarah slid her left hand into the pocket of his crinkly summer jacket and leaned back, looking past his dark silhouette at the Gulf. Somehow the familiar white lines of foam were looking odd, flattened — as if a big helicopter were hovering overhead, blowing off the tops of the waves. Then a flicker of strange reddish lightning revealed something that made her suck in her breath.

"*What* is *that*?" she demanded.

Burke glanced, whistled, and turned onto a rain-slick ramp leading

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into a dumpy little motel called the Sun & Buns. Sarah leaned across him and they both stared at the apparition.

Out in the Gulf an immense dark something was migrating toward the east. Lightning flickered again and the thing seemed flat, a cutout, a demon in two dimensions.

Burke said, almost reverently, "That's the biggest damn spout I ever saw." A moment later he added, "It'll hit the casino."

Tom saw the headlights of the car that had pulled off the road and stopped, and he understood: they were spectators too. Then he stared as if he'd seen a ghost. It was — surely it couldn't be —

It was *her*, and another kind of storm was threatening, a tornado moving over the Gulf and sucking up water like an immense siphon, heading not for the land but for an easier target, a building that was huge but shoddy and weak, perched insecurely on a sandspit....

He'd barely grasped the stunning coincidence when the casino vanished and emerged sparking and flickering like the world's biggest Roman candle. Then all the lights went out and the casino, or whatever was left of it, disappeared in the darkness that enfolded its destroyer.

A bizarre cluster of lightning in the shape of a crab flared in the clouds with long crooked bolts flickering out of it. Tom had a brief vision of a black column heading out to sea. Then a shattering crash of thunder flung him back, back into the haunted corridors of the Grey Star, overwhelmed by memory.

Sarah was the first to come out of the trance. She tapped Burke on the shoulder and he started as if waking from some profound dream.

"Honey," she said in a voice from which all tension was absent, "be careful going back, okay? There'll be power lines down all over."

He stared at her, thinking how many times he'd seen her in the ER, wearing a green cap and bending over a black man with two nine-millimeter slugs in him, saying quietly, "It's all right. You'll be all right," and making him believe it by the sheer power and authority of her stillness.

That was why she continued to work in the ER, wasn't it? Because external crisis gave her inner peace? Or was that only psychobabble?

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"Right," he said, finding his usual refuge in action. He spun the wheel, and for the second time that night gunned the Saab back toward the Strip, now lightless except for a distant erratic spark.

TOM WANTED to shout, to hold them back — her and her friend, whoever he was — to make them share the sudden inundation of terrible memories that for long moments held him in a kind of trance.

In the dark late afternoon on that day so long ago, the lightning had changed color, just like tonight. Even after thinking about it for so many years, he still didn't know why. Maybe ionization caused by the storm, turning the whole sky into some sort of fluorescing neon tube?

Whatever. The point was, on that August day in 1969 the storm's eyewall was nearing the shore with wind so strong that nobody would ever know exactly what the velocity was, because at 200-plus mph the anemometers all blew away.

Powerlines went down and the lights went out. Tom fought his way to the garage, where the gasoline generator stood beside the Volkswagen van with *Grey Star Hotel — Mississippi's Finest* painted on the side panels. A few pulls at the cord set the machine chugging and trembling, and he slipped out of the garage through a back door, because opening the big doors in the teeth of the wind would have been impossible.

Overhead the lightning flickered red and green and the wind was no longer howling but emitting a steady, numbing roar like the exhaust of a thousand jet planes. It was stripping the royal palms and Tom saw the broad fans whirling overhead like the wings of dismembered angels.

Back inside the hotel, lights flickered dim and unsteady, but that contributed to the party's flavor. As he shed his streaming rain gear and tried to catch his breath, he noted people playing the slots, talking, laughing. Couples were dancing in the dining room, others had gathered at long tables piled with cold food. Jack and Jim — Daniels and Beam, that is — were making their usual contribution to the evening's entertainment.

Was there also an undercurrent of fear, people raising their heads, staring uneasily at the wind-hammered shutters? Sure. No peril, no fun. Nothing to remember, to brag about later on, when the storm was over.

Some guests wanted to get a look at the action outside, and two or

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three burly guys unbolted and opened and held the big front door while their ladies crowded around to look. Then somebody screamed. It didn't sound to Tom like an I-am-thrilled type of scream and he hastened across the lobby and looked over the women's heads.

The bare trunks of the royal palms were vibrating like metronomes against the strobe lamp of the sky. But what mesmerized the onlookers was a huge branch that had torn loose from an oak tree. Christ! The thing must have been forty feet long and two feet thick at the butt. Caught in an eddy of the wind, the branch was whirling upright on the sodden lawn of the Grey Star, spinning and pirouetting like a toe dancer. Then a sudden uprush lofted it and flung it like a javelin at the door of the hotel.

The crowd scattered like rabbits, the door slammed back against the wall and the oak limb, corrugated black and streaming water with a few green leaves still attached, crashed through the opening and hit the front desk where Daddy had received guests and smashed it to matchwood.

Standing by the stairs, clinging to the balusters, Tom gaped at the sheer size of the thing. Good Christ, it must weigh half a ton, and if the wind could play with a thing like *that* —

Nobody had died or even been hurt and yet the party had definitely gone sour. They huddled together in the dining room like cattle under a storm. When some woman starting screaming again, Tom, fearing panic, grabbed her and covered her mouth with the palm of his hand — and it was Madge, who never screamed at anything — and she bit him, not meaning to, just a reflex of fear. When cold water surged up over his ankles, Tom realized what had scared her.

Again the lights went out. The garage must have blown away, taking the generator along.

In the sudden cold wet darkness Madge calmed down, perhaps because things were so bad she imagined they couldn't get any worse. She helped Tom find and light candles and a couple of storm lanterns, taking comfort from the glowing crescents of flame springing up on the wicks. When she saw that his hand was bleeding, she exclaimed something he couldn't hear and pulled his handkerchief from his hip pocket and started bandaging him.

She had just tied the knot when, one after another, the shutters and the French doors blew out, cracking like ordnance and scattering like lost kites.

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Wind screamed through the room and tablecloths flew wildly and dishes scattered and smashed against the walls. Tom fought his way to one gaping doorway and clung to the frame with both hands. He was thinking with manic calmness, *Well, sometimes the wind does that — creates a partial vacuum and things blow out instead of in —*

And all the time he was watching a huge mound of black water rising beyond the oaks, crest etched by red lightning, foam sliding down its face. *So that's what death looks like,* he thought. *I've always wondered.*

The wave hit, and the Grey Star began to come apart.

There was a gap in time. How had Tom gotten out, with Madge in tow? The wave itself must have carried them along, and maybe the wind and water blew out the back door or the barricaded rear windows or the wall itself, but for the life of him he couldn't remember. All he knew was that they were suddenly outside and alive, but helpless as driftwood on the rush of the water.

And where had the rope come from? The detail troubled him, because he knew every item, every roll of toilet paper, every scrap of string in the Grey Star, and he couldn't remember ever seeing the rope before. And yet suddenly there it was in his hand, wet and coarse and strong, and when they caught hold of the branchless trunk of a hundred-year-old oak that stood in back of the hotel, he was able to tie Madge on.

Things were flying through the air and splashing into the water and Tom clung to her, protecting her body with his own. In a momentary lull he turned his head to see what had happened to the Grey Star. Is that my life? he wondered, staring at the shifting heap that weltered on the black water.

A new gust hit and the remaining slates from the roof went spiraling up and vanished. He pressed his wet cold face against hers, searching for words of comfort, but all he could do was whisper over and over, "It's all right. We'll be all right."

Something struck him a tremendous blow on the back of the head. He had no actual memory of drowning.

When they reached the Strip, Burke and Sarah found it littered with downed signs and sputtering wires, the air still restless with a spastic wind jerking at flags and dangling streetlights.

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"Could be worse," Burke opined, unruffled.

The buildings though dark looked unhurt. Wide-eyed people gathered behind unbroken windows, like painted backdrops, and watched as Burke guided the Saab through the mess, twice climbing onto sidewalks to get through.

Sirens were howling and braying somewhere; the spout had only grazed the coast and the emergency services, the cops and firemen and EMTs, were alive and on the move.

In fact, state cops had already reached the causeway, where a massive redneck in yellow raingear halted Burke and Sarah.

"You all cain't go out there."

"We work in an ER," said Burke. "Doctor and nurse. You got a use for us?"

Naturally, the cop assumed that Burke was the MD.

"Well, thank you, Doc," he said. "The casino roof is fell in. We called the Trauma Center in Nawlins and they scramblin' some helicopters. We got ambalances comin' in from Biloxi and Gulfport, but I reckon we can use everybody. Just watch out. It's black as the inside of a well-digger's asshole out there — 'scuse me, ma'am."

Burke and Sarah exchanged a quick grin and he turned onto the causeway.

A huge swell had submerged it to a depth of three inches or so, but now the surge began to withdraw, foaming around the stanchions of the guardrails, making deep grumbling sounds as it sucked tons of sand from around the piers beneath the roadway.

Ahead of them, on the concrete apron in front of the casino where Sarah had waited for the Saab, a blue light was revolving. At least one cop car was there already.

"They'll have to bring the survivors outside," said Sarah. "Building's been weakened, whatever's left of it — what *is* left of it? Can't see a damn thing. Civilian triage is easy, you go for the worst cases first. Military triage, that's different, you save the ones who're savable and let the rest go...."

"I know, Honey."

But she went on, speaking calmly, like a penitent reciting unimportant sins to an indifferent priest, arranging things in her mind. Burke's

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loafer-clad foot touched the gas and the car moved a little faster, now that the roadway was clear and shining black in the headlights.

THAT SIEGE OF MEMORY had sucked the last bit of energy out of Tom; surely now he could fade finally into the night.

The image of the Grey Star he had inhabited for thirty years was going too, losing shape and luminosity, dimming with its master. The motel built on the plot of land where the hotel had stood was dark for once, its lights extinguished by the destruction of transformers further down the coast, and people crowded out of their rooms, talking in awed tones.

A little boy and a girl saw a strange silvery something reflected in the water of the swimming pool and tried to point it out. But nobody was paying attention to them, and in any case the image of columns and galleries was growing dim, like a cloud lit by a waning moon.

Just short of the nescience he now longed for, Tom looked a last time out to sea. A memory struggled, just managed to take form. She was there, she was there, and something else, too...the sand had been scoured out, down to the underlying clay, and something white gleamed — something too small and far and deep beneath the waves for any eye to see. But then Tom had not been seeing with his eyes for thirty years.

Only the mind, fading like an old thin moon but still faintly alight, only the mind could see it and pursue.

"Anyway, we can start the triage," said Sarah. "Oh, Christ!"

An injured man had popped up directly in front of them, frantically waving his arms — a skinny, soaked guy with a face fishbelly white, and thin, somehow ancient-looking rags hanging black and pulpy from his arms.

Burke pumped the brake like a driver skidding on ice, but a skein of water was again washing over the roadway and denied them traction. The Saab spun gracefully to the left, passing sideways by the man, flinging a long curved wave aside and coming to rest facing back toward the land.

The water receded, drawing back into the Gulf, streaming off the causeway. And there he was again, facing them as before, pointing

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seaward with both long skinny arms — and they had to be skinny, Sarah now saw, for they were nothing but long beautiful white bones, radius and ulna, fish-picked and sand-scoured — and the face was not a face, it was a cratered moon.

For once Burke was helpless, confronting something that all his experience and common sense told him couldn't be. He simply didn't know what to do, except stare and forget to breathe. Then Sarah felt a shudder beneath them, tore her eyes from the apparition and, following its gesture, looked back.

The causeway was beginning to heel slowly over, twisting like a Möbius strip, the movement starting at the casino where some connection had torn loose and continuing down its length toward the shore. A dreadful noise rose from pilings buckling as the structure collapsed, and the tarmac of the roadway split with a sound of fireworks, throwing black chunks into the air.

"Burke," she said quietly.

He turned and stared at her. The cameo face had never been stiller, more concentrated, more commanding.

"*Drive. Do it now.*"

He slipped his foot from brake to gas pedal and the Saab slid smoothly forward, passing by the man a second time. Only Sarah caught a glimpse of a human face revisiting the white scoured skull for just an instant, before the whole figure vanished behind them, following the collapsing roadway down into the night and the sea.

Standing at the brink, Burke and Sarah and the cop looked at the wreckage of the causeway twisting down into black water still agitated by scurrying cat's-paws. Sirens whooped and whistled, now close at hand, pausing intermittently to bray like a herd of superbeasts.

Sarah was weeping, her eyes half blind, her nose red and clogged — porcelain shattered, perfection lost. She shivered in the circle of Burke's arm, feeling and sharing the tremors passing through his body.

The cop said, "Doctor, that was some smart drivin' you did there. You and your lady friend are some lucky. You all ought to thank your father in heaven."

"Oh, I do," whispered Sarah. "I do."

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*Jeremy Minton is a native Briton who currently lives in Berkshire with his wife and four cats. He says that when he is not writing software or fiction, he frequently travels to France and attends snooker matches. This sf story is one of his first published works and we predict that it won't be his last.*

# Halfway House

## By Jeremy Minton

STEPHEN ENTERED THE office like an amiable tornado. When he saw the gaslamp on the overbearing desk, the fusty curtains, sullen, dust-dark shelves, he did the inevitable doubletake. Alison could almost hear him thinking: *this* is where I'm going to change my life?

"Don't mind the décor," she said. "The Selectors set it up when I first got the job. It was already a century out of date but I was too overawed to complain. Instead, I just got used to it."

Stephen shrugged. They shook, and he held her hand a moment longer than necessary. He smiled. He was seventeen years old. The smile was sweet, but Alison wasn't impressed. She'd been assessing body forms for one hundred and thirty-five years and the shine was gone from the job. It took more than good bones and attitude to reignite her fire; more than she'd found in his clumsy application.

He wanted to be a dragon. He hadn't used the word, but when you spec for a twenty-foot lizard with wings and armored scales, there is really only one thing you *can* call it. At least he hadn't made it breathe fire.

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But he had tried to make it lay eggs: a classic design error. Large, oviparous creatures were almost never approved. She pointed this out and he said, "I know. I always thought it strange. Laying eggs has worked awfully well for an awfully long time. Crocodiles have bred that way since long before there were dinosaurs."

"They've bred that way on Earth. You're designing for Ditranea. It's a completely different ecology."

"About which designers have been given scandalously scant data. If you've finally decided to *tell* people about the world their creations are going to live on, I think that's good and I'm sure other candidates will appreciate it. But it's unfair to penalize me for failing to consider some environmental factor that no one knows about."

"Fairness doesn't come into it," said Alison. "My job is to decide on a creature's long-term viability given its target environment. Your creature's viability is nil."

"Because it lays eggs?"

"No. Because it won't live long enough to breed. By the time it's two years old it'll be too heavy to fly. The ratio for calorific absorption is wrong."

She flipped through his design to where the green annotations turned red. He stared for a while, like a witness to his own evisceration. When he finally spoke he seemed to have aged ten years.

"I've screwed it up," he said.

"It's quite a subtle error. There *are* several others, but it made sense to focus on this one, given that it seems to be fatal."

"I don't believe it. I've had this plan proofread by experts. Some of them had it for weeks. Not to mention the three and a half years I worked on it myself. How long did it take you to destroy it?"

"About three-quarters of an hour. But, then again, I've had a lot of practice."

"I'd heard that," he said. "That it's always been you doing this job, ever since the World Gate opened. Is that right?"

He looked like he didn't believe it, which was fair enough, she guessed. She could have passed for thirty in the fluttering, flickering gaslight.

"Yes, it's always been me," she said, and hoped that would close the

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subject. She picked up her pen cap and clicked it onto the barrel. "I think we're just about done here, unless there's anything you want to ask me."

That was when he realized the interview was over.

"Is that it?" he said. "You blow away my life, and that's it? Don't I even get any sympathy?"

"I don't do sympathy. Would it make you feel better if I did? Will you take your folder with you, or would you rather I threw it away?"

He didn't, couldn't answer; just blundered to his feet as though he had been blinded. He was practically out the door when something seemed to strike him.

"Aren't you going to give me a disk?"

Alison just stared at him, her face a practiced mask.

"What do you want it for? It's not a green one."

"I thought you had to give me a disk."

"If you ask me, I'm required to give it."

He sidled back toward her, almost crippled by hope.

"I'd like my disk then, please."

She reached into a desk drawer, pulled out a circle of plastic and pushed it into his hand, reciting from long memory the accompanying speech. Stephen wasn't listening. He stared at the disk she had given him. It was yellow.

"This means I can come back," he said. "This gives me the right to reapply and you'd have let me just walk off without it."

"That's right," she said. "I would. Oh, please don't look so shocked. If you'd closed the door just now, you'd be on your way back to Earth to get on with your life. And that's what you still can do. A yellow disk means you're *allowed* to reapply. It doesn't mean you *have* to.

"Listen to me, Stephen. Halfway House is not a happy place. The people who come here are not happy people. You're only seventeen. Whatever you're running from, does it really justify giving up your home and the shape you were born in to escape it? Do you really — ?"

She broke off. "Oh, what on Earth's the use? You're not even listening, are you?"

"I can come back," said Stephen.

"Yes, you can come back."

She waited till he'd closed the door before adding the words, "You idiot."

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Seven years passed before they met again. The spring was gone from his step, and he fell into the candidate's chair as though he'd forgotten how to be gentle. He did not smile. He glared at her and at the room and then snarled, "Nothing's changed. Not a solitary thing."

"Probably not," she said.

"You're even wearing the same dress. Same dress, same hair, same shadow on your eyes."

"You're guessing," she said. "You don't remember those details."

"You're wrong. I remember everything. The way you looked, the words you said, the way your hand felt when you touched me."

"I never touched you."

"You've never stopped touching me. There's not a day when I've not thought of you."

Alison grimaced. It wasn't going to be one of *those* interviews, was it?

"That was foolish. If you've wasted your time thinking about me instead of your design, this may be a very short interview."

"You've read it through," he said. "You know it's better than the last one. A lot better."

She had. She did. It was.

"The math is certainly cleaner. Did you find some better experts?"

"After a fashion. Every time I thought I'd got the numbers right, I'd imagine I was you and I'd work out how to break them. Over and over again. Dreaming up new ways to break them, just the way you would."

"You make it sound like I *enjoy* breaking designs."

"No, I think you figure it's better to destroy people on paper than letting them get killed by the Selectors or on Ditranea. It took me a while to get that, but once I did it made me feel even closer to you."

This was definitely not good.

"*Even* closer?" she said.

She saw the hesitation, and the moment of decision.

"Even closer, yes. Look, I don't care if it sounds presumptuous, I have to let you know. Over the years I've worked on this design I've thought of you more and more. I've come to understand you, to care about you. I think I may even be in love with you."

Alison said, "I don't know about presumptuous, but it certainly

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sounds ridiculous. We met each other once, seven years ago. It lasted forty minutes."

"I guess this must be hard to understand."

"No," she said. "It's actually quite easy. You know I'm here on my own; that I've been alone for years. You think loneliness and lack of human contact have robbed me of my wits, and that this nonsensical profession of affection will somehow improve your chances of approval."

"That isn't it. That isn't it at all."

"Isn't it? You mean you really love me?" She didn't even care enough to try and sound sarcastic. "Well, gosh, isn't that nice? It's always nice to be loved. Not that it makes any difference."

"What doesn't?"

"Anything. Anything you say. Anything you feel. I'm not assessing your feelings. The only thing I'm judging is your creature. Neither threats nor pleas nor promises can make the slightest difference. Not even 'love.'"

"All right," he said. "Will you have dinner with me?"

"I beg your pardon!"

"Have dinner with me. You still *have* dinner, don't you? Dinner you eat? You're not just plugged in for a recharge?"

"I'm not a robot. I eat. But it's utterly out of the question."

"Why?"

"Because you're weird. Weird and creepy."

"Granted," he said. "But I have my faults as well."

"And I'm sure lots of other people would appreciate them more than I. Go spend time with them. I have to do your assessment."

"It can wait. It's waited seven years. Another hour won't kill. Why not? You keep saying it won't make a difference, but it will. It will make a difference to me. And maybe to you, too. At least it'll mark this day as different from the rest. Come on," he said. "Why not?"

Alison considered. Then, to her own astonishment, she shrugged and said, "Why not?"

Actually, there were loads of good reasons why not, and she would remember some of them later, when she was summoned by Gordino to his tank. But to start with, it seemed simple, although strange.

She laid out the ground rules before they even sat down, while the

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dough-faced waiter was rummaging 'round for a second set of cutlery and the cook was working hastily to distribute one meal across two plates.

"We're not going to discuss your design. And if I find we are, I'm going to ask you to leave. This is a social occasion so we're not going to talk about work. Nor do I wish to talk about the feelings you have for me."

"The first rule is fine," said Stephen. "But the second — I've spent seven years thinking about you. I don't know if I can simply switch it off."

"Seven years? Life on Earth really must be bad." She saw his face and added, "That was meant to be a joke."

"You don't go home much, do you?"

"I don't go home at all. The Selectors think it might affect my judgments."

"They're probably right. It'd be harder to throw men back into the mincer if you'd had to hear them screaming."

"I'm not completely mollycoddled. I still get news. I know that life on Earth is pretty hard."

"If that's all you know, you don't know anything. Life on Earth's not *hard*. Life on Earth is *ending*. That's why the Selectors are here. Why they've built the World Gate and allowed a trickle of people to go through. That's why people like me spend half their lives trying to design body forms. It's not for love of the new world. It's because our only choices are to try for life on Ditranea or to die."

Alison put down her fork and glanced nervously around.

"You know that what you're saying is seditious? It is illegal to claim that the government is not winning the environmental battle. They could ban your application."

"Only if you told them. Which you won't. You'd not condemn a man for speaking the truth."

"Neither of us know it's the truth."

"Of course we know. Only lunatic optimists still believe that three hundred years of ecological negligence can be turned round if we all try really hard. Or that when the ordure hits the air conditioning the Selectors are going to relent and let millions through the World Gate. If mass-transfers were possible they'd be doing them already. The truth is that we're screwed and everybody knows it. The people in charge are

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deliberately playing down the scale of the disaster to give themselves time to escape. Why else do you think so many applicants have off-the-shelf backgrounds and liars' eyes and never want to talk about their pasts?"

"I don't want to talk about their pasts either," said Alison. "It doesn't — "

"' — make any difference.' Yes, I know. And why do you think the law got framed that way, to explicitly remove personal background as a criterion for approval?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"It was so the people who were *responsible* for the mess couldn't have it held against them."

She said, "Do we have to carry on talking about this?"

"Why? Am I making you uncomfortable?"

"As a matter of fact, you are."

"I'm so sorry. The fact you might be sending me home to die and you don't even care if the rules that guide your decisions are fair or not makes *me* a bit uncomfortable."

She grew rigid in her seat.

"Don't tell me I don't care. And don't you *dare* tell me my decisions are unfair. Day after day I break hearts and condemn people to misery. Do you think I could do that if I didn't believe my decisions were as fair as I could make them?"

"I'm not saying *you* are unjust. The system – "

"The system stinks," she said. "Always has, always will. Rich people will screw over poor ones till the world drowns in its own filth."

"If you believe that, why are you still here?"

"Because as long as I'm here, doing my job, it will still be possible for anyone who makes it to the House to have a fair assessment and get what they deserve."

Alison had remembered why she didn't eat with candidates. It always ended up by being awful for them both. The lumps of food swelled in her mouth till she feared that she might choke.

They pressed on with the meal. When they were finally through, they went downstairs, and Alison gave Stephen what his application deserved. It was a second yellow disk.

* * *

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A week and a half later, she stuffed air plugs in her nostrils and rubbed cream onto her skin; she put a mask over her mouth and goggles over her eyes. Then she stepped into the tank where the Chief Selector lived. It had been six months since she was last face to face with Gordino and she experienced the usual jolt as her eyes reminded her brain of just how alien he was.

Gordino's three-legged frame managed to look cramped in a space that was bigger than a basketball court. A dry, scaly odor, reminiscent of reptiles, hung in the air around him, counterpointing the sting of chlorine. His overmuscled torso was topped by twin pairs of arms. The lower pair were approximately human and ended in a knot of jointed digits. The upper pair were longer. They were whiplike, graced with vicious slicing edges.

Gordino had performed a trial this morning. There were smears of blood along his upper arms. Someone to whom Alison had given a green disk had fought this mass of muscle. Gordino's appearance gave no clue to the outcome, nor to anything else. Selectors conveyed emotions via pheromone and only the pads above their cheeks gave visual clues to their feelings. Even these were ambiguous: the mottled blue of hunger could also indicate boredom, and the scraped-scab tint of humor was identical to rage.

Right now, Gordino's patches were a placid, neutral green. His lower eyes peered searchingly at Alison while the larger, blood-red central orb, rolled restlessly.

"Do you know why I've asked you here?" began Gordino.

"I'm not psychic," answered Alison. "If you've got something to say to me, why don't you say it?"

Flecks of crimson glowed inside each cheek.

"Not psychic, no. Nor telepathic, either. But surely you can guess? Someone with your talent and experience."

Oh no, she thought. This isn't going to be good.

"Okay, okay, I get it. This is about Stephen Byrne."

"You see," he said. "You did know all along. And what do you think I wanted to discuss?"

"I suspect there've been complaints about his disk."

"Not complaints, exactly. There has been *speculation*. I presume you

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are aware of your government's concern that criminals and malcontents are able to evade justice when this House grants them green disks."

"And I presume *you're* aware that it's the government's own laws that make that possible. *'A person's past — '*"

"*' — is no concern of the assessor.'* I am aware of the rule. It has always been understood that the House provides a hole through which undesirables may slip. The government does not like this but has been prepared to accept it so long as the integrity of our judgments keeps the numbers manageably small."

"You imply that that this may be changing."

"Concerns have been raised," said Gordino.

A collage of images lit the wall behind him. Most were text, but there were pictures too. Shots of Stephen and of her. It didn't take much reading to understand the gist, but she forced herself to read them all through, anyway.

"Do you see why this has caused us consternation?"

The word "Yes" emerged from her mouth as though extruded from an oil press.

"First, I must ask you: is the story true?"

"The story being that he and I had sex, and in consequence he got a yellow disk. No, it is not true."

"So why *did* you give him a second yellow disk?"

"Because that's what his design deserved."

"You are convinced of that?"

Alison drew in a breath, and immediately wished she hadn't as the chlorine tore at her throat.

"I have been doing this job for one hundred and forty-two years. I know what designs deserve. His deserved a yellow."

"It's a fairly rare occurrence, though, for an individual applicant to receive a second yellow disk."

"Rare but not unheard of. It's happened four times before that I can think of."

"But never to a man you've just had dinner with."

"I'll admit that dinner was an error. But I utterly refute the suggestion that I let that error influence my judgment."

"Do not distress yourself, my Lady. I have to ask these questions. What did you discuss over dinner?"

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"We did *not* discuss his application. I told him that we wouldn't, and we didn't."

"Very commendable. But I didn't ask what you did not discuss. I asked what you did discuss. Did you talk about his family? His wife? His three-year-old daughter?"

Her eyes were suddenly burning.

"He never mentioned them."

"How curiously remiss. What *did* you talk about? Did he make allegations or threats concerning Earth's government or the operation of this House?"

"He said things I think that ninety percent of the population would agree with. I don't recall any threats."

"I asked a simple question," said Gordino. "Why do you respond so defensively?"

"Because you're trying to attack him. You're trying to attack me. The government's afraid of the truth and wants to silence those who speak it."

"I'm not afraid. I just want to know what was said."

"He said the Earth is dying; that the government knows it and is lying to the people so that politicians and business leaders will have time to get away."

"And what did you say?"

"I didn't say anything. I'm not in a position to judge and I felt it inappropriate to listen to such things."

"Which is true. But you still must have an opinion."

"Yes, I have an opinion. In my opinion, what Stephen Byrne says is very likely true. The Earth is dying. And the Selectors are helping it die by making people think there's a get-out clause if worse comes to worst."

"You do not think a get-out clause exists?"

"I don't believe enough energy is available to send more than a handful of people to Ditranea. I think that the people I send back to Earth will all but surely die."

There was a long silence, then Gordino said, "While you were talking to Mr. Byrne, did you happen to see this?"

The text on the wall was replaced by a logo or an emblem. Something like a U with branches knocked together.

"Probably made of silver, a lapel badge, perhaps."

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Alison was puzzled. The Selectors had never previously shown an interest in jewelry.

"I don't remember anything like that. What is it?"

"The emblem of Justice Through Fear, a subversive organization whose goal is the destruction of government."

Alison said, "Gordino, where you come from, do members of subversive organizations often wear membership badges?"

"We do not have subversion where I come from."

"Figures. If you did, you'd know this was stupid. Suppose Stephen Byrne *did* belong to a terrorist group and that we were in collusion. The last thing we'd do is draw attention to ourselves by having dinner together."

"You're assuming that collusion had already been established. But if this was the occasion that this man had sought to sway you, and you had let yourself be swayed, he would have needed some way to convey your acceptance to his associates. You would have had to send him home."

"So I'd have given him a red disk, not a yellow one."

"A red disk would prohibit his return to Halfway House. If a sexual liaison had been established between the two of you I suspect that you would want him to come back."

"I've told you already: we did not have sex. And anyway, this entire thing is stupid. Have you *looked* at Stephen's proposal?"

"Yes."

"So you know my judgment was valid. Don't you?"

"The decision appears fair."

"So what is all this bullshit? Before you start believing these accusations you ought to be asking yourself who's making them. Who gains if I'm not here?"

"And who does gain?" said Gordino.

"Anyone with money or clout who'd like to bribe or bully their way to Ditranea. Anyone who's tried to get past me and found I can't be bought."

"You raise an interesting question," said Gordino. "The question of the story's origin was one we'd not considered. In that we were remiss." His killing arms twitched minutely, like the tips of a cat's tail.

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"There is doubt in this matter," he said. "Until that doubt can be resolved, no action will be taken. You will carry on with your duties."

"Until?"

"Until something occurs to change the situation."

THIRTEEN YEARS passed, and nothing much occurred. Candidates came and went. Some passed, some failed, a few got yellow disks. The next time they met, she did not recognize him. She would never have thought this man with twisted limbs and ruined skin could be the eager, vibrant child who had once strode into her office. It was only when he said, "Hello, Alison," that she knew that it was him.

She held up her hand, and as she did, she couldn't help comparing her straight, unchanging fingers with the corrupted mess of meat on his right wrist. It was more than age and hardship that did that. Those scars bore witness to unconscionable violence. She wondered how it had happened and how much it might have hurt. She answered her own question: *not enough*.

"I'd prefer it if you didn't use my name. In fact, I'd prefer it if you didn't speak at all. But it would be impractical to conduct the assessment on that basis, so could you confine yourself to your application and not try to distract me with irrelevancies?"

"But, Ali — " he began, and her glare was enough to snap the final syllable right off the end of his tongue.

"All I want to do is explain."

"Too bad," she said. "You can't. I'm serious about this. I don't want to hear apologies or excuses. I don't want to hear how sorry you are or how much you regret what you did. I want to complete your assessment and get you out of my life." She didn't believe his expression of hurt bewilderment was real. But she really wished it was. "Maybe I can speed things up by telling you you've failed. Not even an amber, this time. I'm sending you home for good."

I'll hate myself for this later, she thought. Not for how I'm saying it, but for how it makes me feel.

"That seems a little harsh," he said. "You haven't even asked me any questions."

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"I don't need to. You've made a fundamental error. The memories and mind state of the candidate need to be mapped onto the brain of the target creature; this 'blow bug' of yours has seventy-five thousand neurons. That's thirteen thousand times too small for even your small thoughts."

"You know," he said. "If I were to replay that comment as part of an appeal against your decision it might be seen as indicative of dislike, or even prejudice."

He was technically correct, but the fact that he dared say it served only to increase her anger.

"Oh no, Stephen. It doesn't display anything as mild as dislike. What I hope you will see from my comments is that I loathe and detest the sight of you." She smiled at him and her mouth felt like a cobra's.

"But it doesn't make any difference. You ought to know by now. I'm not rejecting your application because I don't like you. I'm rejecting it because it merits rejection. The body shapes of creatures we're sending to Ditranea must possess an intelligence-capable brain. Blow bug has no brain, therefore it fails. End of story."

"Blow bug has a brain," he answered. "I simply avoided the error of trapping that brain inside a single body."

Alison had no interest in arguing, but the accumulated habits of decades proved too strong.

"Why is that an error? Evolution has used it happily for many million years."

"Evolution isn't a designer. There's no strategic vision. The *one-brain-one-body* thing works, but it's hardly an optimal solution. Look at the creatures we're sending to Ditranea. All those teeth and claws. All that camouflage and cunning. All that *work* to keep the fragile shell of thoughts and feelings running. It's so unnecessary."

"You'd prefer mindless idiocy?" she said.

"No! I'd prefer a brain built out of a million living pieces, a brain whose thoughts were defined by music in the air and the flow of pheromones across a forest. I'd prefer a brain so deeply embedded in its environment that it could never think that something didn't matter because it happened far away."

"Very nice," she answered. "Very poetic. But not the slightest use so far as this application is concerned. You *know* that in order to pass through

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the World Gate you have to get past a Selector. This little creature, not a quarter of an inch long and without even a decent sting to its name, wouldn't stand a chance."

The vision of Gordino slashing the air with his killing arms in pursuit of a tiny insect was enough to make her smile. "It would just get swatted flat."

"It's hardly a fair test," he objected. "Blow Bug is a compound mind. Its thoughts and intelligence emerge as the population rises. One bug on its own wouldn't stand a chance, I grant you, but a million of them together, acting in intelligent concert — they'd be unstoppable."

"A million of anything would be unstoppable, at least in the short term, just from weight of numbers. But the rules say single combat, a one-on-one confrontation."

"But that isn't fair," he said. "It's stupid and short-sighted and it isn't damn well fair."

He wasn't saying anything she hadn't heard a thousand times before. She had learned to ignore such bleating, but the hot spark of his anger was enough to ignite her own.

"What does it matter whether or not it's fair? What's fair about any of this? You're trying to use your intellect to flee from Earth while everyone else dies. Is that especially fair?"

His eyes widened. That single, thoughtless shot had hurt him more than anything else she'd said. She didn't know why and didn't care much either. It was enough to know she had finally managed to hurt him.

"Look at what you did to me," she said. "In what way was that fair? I told you that what mattered to me more than anything else was my integrity and you tried to compromise me in the worst way that you could."

"I didn't want to," he said.

"That makes me feel so much better."

"I mean it. I never meant to hurt you. I would never have done it if there'd been any other way."

"Crap! You told me that you cared for me and then you sold my reputation to the gossip rags. You told me that you cared for me, that you spent your whole life thinking of me, but you didn't have the guts to tell me that you were married with a kid."

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"They told you that, did they?"

"Yes," she said. "They told me."

"Did they also tell you that my little girl was dying? That while you were telling me all the troubles of your job, my wife was waiting in hospital to see if Lauren would live or die?"

"Even if that's true — And God knows, I've no reason to believe you — but even if it is true, it doesn't excuse what you did. If you really cared so about your family, then why were you here with me and not with them?"

"What good could I do there? I'm not a doctor. I didn't even have the money to pay for the treatment Lauren needed. All our cash had gone on getting the design complete and bribing our way past the Earthside officials. *You* might be incorruptible, but you're the only part of the system that is. There was no way I could help by staying with her. We figured that if I took the test and passed we could sell the disk to pay for Lauren's treatment. It was only when that failed that we realized that we might have something else that we could use."

"You used me," said Alison. Her anger was leaking from her, like breath when you can't hold it anymore.

"Yes," he said. "I used you. What else could I do? My little girl was dying."

"You used me. You lied to me. All that crap about having feelings for me, all of it was lies."

"All of it was true," he said. "Except that I don't *have feelings for you*. I love you. I've always loved you."

"Oh give it a rest," she said. "You don't have to pretend anymore. You don't really love me, but that's okay. I forgive you anyhow."

There was a space where her anger had been. Her voice when she spoke was like the sighing of old dust.

"You were doing what you thought was right." *Assuming you're not still lying*, she thought but did not say. If he was still lying she didn't want to know. "And it's not as if anything got broken."

*Except my pride. Except my stupid heart.*

"That isn't true. I know I hurt you dreadfully."

"Yes," she said. "You did." Almost as an afterthought she added, "I hope that it was worth it."

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If there was anything she could have done to snatch those words out of the air and never to have said them, she would have done it gladly. She understood too late the depths and causes of his pain.

When he was finally able to ease his words past the broken glass in his throat what emerged was the last thing that she either expected or wanted to hear.

"I'm sorry I hurt you, Alison. I needed — I wanted — it didn't do any good, but I had to try, I had to — I'm sorry, Alison, I'm so dreadfully, dreadfully sorry."

Then the words were gone altogether, and only the tears were left. She hated to have to see it. She could never remember feeling so hurt by someone else's grief. A loathsome, cowardly part of her wished she could send him away, just expel him from the room so she wouldn't have to see it anymore.

Since she couldn't do that, there was only one other option. She got up from her chair, and walked to the other side of the desk, and put her arms around him.

"Don't be sorry, idiot. You've not done anything wrong."

HE STARTED to grow heavy in her arms. That was when she knew that their time was drawing to a close. They had coupled without words, without thought, which is harder than is generally supposed. The brain is like the heart: it just keeps on regardless. No matter how much you try to lose yourself, the thoughts still come, the blood still pumps, the moments slip away.

"What happened to your hand?" she said.

It looked as though somebody had taken hold of the second and third fingers and pulled his flesh apart, then crudely forced the pieces back together. And now, along the edges of his palm, she saw a row of small round bruises. She knew without needing to touch them that the size and shape of the marks would match with her own fingers.

"Needlebug," he said. "Another toy in the post."

She thought about the fragments the device would leave in a wound, the capacity those fragments had for later attacking nerves. She thought of the cost of fully cleaning up a needlebug wound and tried not to think anymore.

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"Do you know who it was from?"

He shrugged. "God mob, I suppose. Can't think who else would hate me that much. It's kind of strange, you know, to be hated for trying to escape. Still, it's one less thing to worry about in future."

She looked away, not wanting to see how hard he was trying to smile.

"I might be able to swing it. The color of the disk, I mean."

"After all the things you said earlier I think I'd be doing well if it merited a red."

"I'm allowed to award marks for originality. Building a planet-sized brain from insects is certainly original."

He sat up beside her, stared toward the window. The cold, sad light was fading toward dusk.

"It's not just original, it's better. I genuinely believe that. Do you really think that the people who cheat their way off Earth will make a better fist of things a second time around? All those walking weapons? I know Ditranea is supposed to be a Hell-world, but I can't believe it'll be half so fearsome as the creatures that we're sending there."

"Your little insects would be better?"

"My little insects?" he said. "Let two blow bugs loose on Ditranea and the bug mind will be the dominant intelligence in ten years. If the other species try to fight, it'll be the only form of intelligence in thirty. Insects and bacteria have shaped and reshaped our world without any sort of planning or intelligence. There's nothing a conscious swarm can't do. Nothing — "

He broke off. "This is all irrelevant isn't it? It isn't going to happen."

"No," she said. "It isn't. I have to send you home."

She ran her finger down the length of his arm, wincing when she reached the roughness of his hand. "Please don't be angry with me."

"I'm not angry. Or, at least, I'm not angry for the reason that you think."

She could hear tears in his voice, and wondered how he kept from howling. She'd spent her whole life breaking people's dreams and still hadn't the first idea how they were strong enough to stand it.

"I'm not angry you're sending me home. It's not as if I could be part of the bug mind anyway. I'm not even angry that you're rejecting my

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design. I think you're wrong, but I genuinely don't *care*. I've not cared about anything that much, not since Lauren died.

"The thing that's really killing me is that I won't see you again, not for years. I might die before I see you again. And I miss you, Alison. I miss you so very much."

She moped for several days, then went to see Gordino.

"I'm giving up this job," she said. "I'm sick of breaking hearts."

The Selector looked the way he always did. She wondered if his body was preserved by the same House magic which held her own decay in check or if he just came from a long-lived species.

"That is not the sole extent of your work. Your judgments also save lives."

"Okay, I save lives. What's the use of that?"

"Life has no use, of itself. Use and meaning are things which we impose on existence. By preserving people's lives you give them the opportunity to define their own meaning. We believe that this is good."

"Maybe it is," she said. "But I still don't want to do it anymore."

Gordino said, "If you want to stop we will not make you continue. What is more, as a token of our gratitude, we will let you choose a body form and see the world your judgments have created. But you must understand that if you stop, the World Gate will be closed. No further transportation will occur."

"You're saying if I quit today the Gate is closed for good?"

"That is what I'm saying."

"That's crazy! Why would you do that?"

"Because without you we will have no way of separating those who deserve to live from those who deserve to die."

"Thousands of people would be pleased do this job."

"Perhaps. But we could not trust their judgment. They are all corrupted by the sickness of your world. Only you have the distance to judge fairly."

"You'll have to do it yourselves, then."

"No," he said. "We will not be your judges. We will not compound our crime by imposing our values upon you."

"I don't understand. What crime?"

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"You have made the accusation yourself: that our presence speeds Earth's death by distracting resources from efforts that might save it. We fear this may be true. Our sole defense is that we stay here only on sufferance. Our aid was offered and accepted. If you tell us we're not wanted, we will leave. The decision is yours, just as the decision as to who will live is yours."

Alison said, "You're saying I can carry on, or leave my people to die. That's not a choice at all."

The Selector said, "There are always choices. It is choice that gives meaning to life."

The last time she saw Stephen, he was obviously dying.

"Surprised to see me?" he said.

"Terminally," she answered.

"You always had a high opinion of me."

"It's not that. It's just that I never see real people anymore. Everyone who comes here now has fat, complacent hands and guilty eyes. They stink of success and other people's hurt. I didn't expect to see you in such company."

He said, "I have my ways. There were lots of people went to lots of trouble to see that I got here."

"Well, if they were hoping for footage of us screwing they're going to be disappointed."

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "I guess I'm past my prime, but you still look pretty — "

"I look like shit. And unless that needlebug has got into your eyes, you know I look like shit."

"It's funny you should say that...."

He let the words tail off, and for the first time she really looked into his face. Into his eyes.

"Oh my God," she said. "I'm sorry. How bad is it?"

"I'm down to about thirty percent vision in this eye. A bit less in the other. But, actually, you're right. I *can* see what you look like. It's not so good, old thing."

"The wild, wild life here has finally caught me up."

"You've got blood all over your teeth."

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"I'm falling apart," she said. "I bruise, I bleed, my mouth is full of sores. I wake up in the mornings and I feel so *old*. I gather from Gordino that the Earth-rot has infected our systems. The mechanics that separated me from the regular flow of time are dying and I seem to be going with them. It's not an enjoyable process."

She gave her little fingernail an experimental tug. It came free with a minute, sucking sound. Blood oozed, slow and maudlin in the place where it had been.

"You ought to retire," he said.

"I tried. It didn't work. I'm stuck with this instead. The only thing in its favor is it's relatively painless."

"That's good," he said. "I'm hurting all the time. There are palliatives, apparently, but they cost cash I need for other things."

"Things like this creature, hmm? Is it any good?"

"I thought you were meant to tell me."

"I am. But if you know the answer it'll save a bit of effort. Is it any good?"

"No," he said. "It's useless. I've only done one good design in my life and you rejected it. But I think you ought to look anyway. It may possibly seem familiar."

She opened the cover on the document and read:

*Body form design for large, oviparous, flying reptile.* And just below, in big, bold letters: *DRAGON.*

"I fixed the math," he said. "I always knew it was doable and I wanted to prove it was."

She picked up her pen and read. At the end of thirty minutes she put the pen back down. There were no marks on the paper.

"The errors are all gone," she said. "Just one question. In section twelve you have written about the shell's thickness protecting the embryo from gamma rays. Do you not mean alpha particles?"

"I have written what I intended to write."

"Indeed? Well, what do you want me to say? The math may be in order, but it doesn't really matter. The creature wasn't viable the first time, and it isn't viable now. I can't even issue you another yellow disk. Not for a second failure of a similar design. You've finally gone and got yourself a red."

"I know that," he said. "I've always known what you were going to

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give me."

She looked at him with bafflement and rage.

"So why the hell are you here?"

"I am going to be blind," he said. "This was the only chance I had to see you."

"Okay, you've seen me. Now you can get out."

She shoved her hand, still bleeding, into the drawer of her desk, and withdrew the token. She stumbled through the ritual of dismissal, pressed it into his hand. He tried to hold onto her but she snatched herself away from him.

"Let go!" she cried. "Don't touch me anymore."

"But — "

"No buts, no talk. You've said enough to me. Go! Just go now, or I'll kill you."

He looked at her aghast. "Alison, Alison I — "

"Don't say it. Don't say another word. Just this once please listen and don't talk. How many times have I told you? *It doesn't make a difference.* Love, hate, want: whether you see me or not. It's not allowed to matter."

"You're wrong," he said. "Everything can matter if you let it. I've touched you. That matters. We've given each other things. That matters. It matters if you dare to let it matter."

"So old, and still a sweet, romantic fool."

"I'm going to be blind. I don't see the sense in romance." He held up his hand. Her blood was running down and round the ugly, crooked scars. "I don't see the sense in saying anything but the truth."

He did not try to touch her anymore, but just before he closed the door he offered her a smile. She did not see it. Her eyes were blurring and she could not bear to look up. When he was gone, she threw back her head and howled. She cried and sobbed as the dark came down, holding her wounded hand before her eyes.

After that, there wasn't much to do. She tidied her drawers, and jettisoned her papers. She stuck a POSITION CLOSED sign on her desk and left without locking the door.

Walking through the House she heard distant thuds, like a giant kicking the walls, and the patter of machine-gun fire. The mob was here

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at last. Stephen must have let them in — the price he'd paid to get here. She ought to have been angry but didn't have the heart.

The end of her finger hurt. Which was odd. Things like that never hurt her anymore. The wound was still oozing and the skin was swollen, as though her body was trying to fight off an infection.

*We've given each other things.*

What had he given her?

Gordino was waiting, his cheek pads mottled with red.

"So much destruction," he said. "Don't they understand that if they wanted us gone they only had to ask?"

She said nothing. She wondered what Stephen might have asked her, if she'd let him. To come away with him? A final kiss? Neither seemed particularly likely. The pulse in her fingers throbbed. Her skin felt hot.

*We have given each other things.*

What had he given her that was worth coming all this way to give? The idea that he loved her seemed as ludicrous as ever. And yet he had come back. He had come back with a design that he must have known would fail. He had touched her.

The explosions were closer now.

"I take it you'll be leaving."

Gordino said, "I'm not going to stay and be shot."

"Afraid to die?"

She was genuinely curious, rather than sarcastic.

"No," he said. "But there are better things for me to do with my life. I have to fight the candidates that you approved today, and beyond that there are other doors to open. Other worlds. And what of you, my Lady Judge?"

"What about me?"

"I made a promise, long ago. I am ready to fulfil it."

She said, "I wondered if you'd remember."

"We do not forget our debts, whether owed or owing."

"So you're going to let me through the World Gate?"

"You are free to pass the World Gate. Once you have passed me."

"Oh," she said. "I thought there'd be a catch."

"No catch, just a price. The price that everyone pays. If you wish to gain the World Gate you must fight me."

His claws were twitching with eagerness.

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"You want to kill me, don't you? All these years we've known each other and you actually want to kill me."

"I do not want or not want. I am made for killing, for the choice of life or death. I have made you an offer. You can accept the dare of the door, or you can entrust yourself to the kindness of your species. Either way, our time together is done. You will choose now."

But Alison didn't choose. She was trying to work out if her mind had finally broken or if the patterns she was guessing at were really proof of purpose. Was the use of gamma symbols in Stephen's final proof a reference to the Justice Through Fear logo, or simply confirmation of his basic lack of care? Had he given her something or not?

"Very well," she said. "I will accept your offer."

"I am glad," said Gordino. "You have scant hope of any other kindness and we owe you some, I think." The blush in his cheek pads deepened. "Besides, I must confess to curiosity. Out of all the designs you have seen which one you will choose?"

"That's easy. I'm far too old to bend to another shape. I shall fight you as I am."

The Selector paused. Alison had finally managed to surprise him.

"Is this some kind of jest?"

She gazed right back, praying he wouldn't push it. She didn't know which fear was worse: that he would examine her and find her tampered blood, or that he would examine her and find nothing. If her blood had not been tampered with there was nothing for her to do here except die.

Eventually, Gordino said, "I see that it is not. Very well. Will you fight me as you once were or as you are?"

"Just as I am. It would be too strange to do anything else."

"Your physical condition is not good."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Tell me if the Blow Bug actually could work. Tell me the pain in my hand is there for a reason. Tell me there are spores in my blood, the germs of a new race. Tell me I'm not pinning my hopes on something that never existed.

"Are you asking me to kill you?" said Gordino.

"I'm asking you to fight. Come on. You said yourself that time is running out."

"I didn't, but it is."

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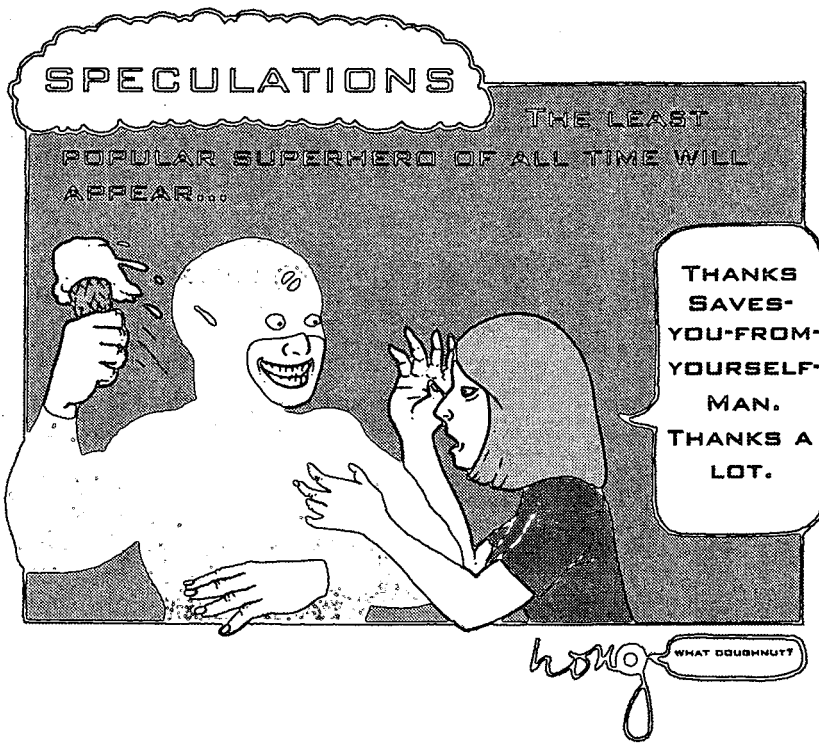
He turned and trotted swiftly to the far end of the hall. In the shadows by the door he turned to face her. She could see his red eye glinting. The air was thick with the smell of snakes and death. For the last time she remembered just how frightening that smell was. He shifted in the dark. His arms were open in a parody of welcome.

"Come," he said.

She walked into the night of his embrace.


SPECULATIONS
THE LEAST POPULAR SUPERHERO OF ALL TIME WILL APPEAR...
THANKS SAVES-YOU-FROM-YOURSELF-MAN. THANKS A LOT.
WHAT DOUGHNUT?

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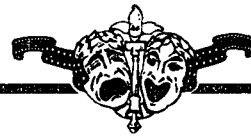

# FILMS

## KATHI MAIO

## LOST IN THE LAND OF FAKE FAKES

ANDREW Niccol has said that he never set out to specialize in "social science fiction film." His film projects just end up that way.

Consciously, or not, Niccol's career, to date, has made him one of the Great Bright Hopes of fantasy moviemaking. His films go beyond the FX-laden space cartoons that have dominated the field in recent years, to approach something more thought-provoking and less formulaic than your average alien adventure-comedy or intergalactic epic.

*Gattaca* (1997), an impressive debut both written and directed by Niccol, is a somber and stylish thriller of the "not too distant future." In it, a natural-born, and therefore genetically inferior, young man named Vincent (Ethan Hawke) must pull off a most elaborate masquerade in order to live out his dream of space exploration. After purchasing the identity (and blood and urine samples) of a permanently injured genetically engineered athlete named Jerome (Jude Law), it looks like Vincent might be able to pass himself off as a member of the genomic elite. That is, until a murder at Gattaca brings intensive scrutiny to everyone at the corporate space agency.

*Gattaca* doesn't quite live up to the promise of its premise. The look and tone of the film is smart and sophisticated — despite all the bags of pee we have to look at — but the film is a bit too self-conscious in its elegance, rather like a luxury car commercial. (Only after seeing it did I discover that Niccol had, indeed, done ten years of journeyman work in television advertising.) And the climax, which goes nowhere and involves a subplot of

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sibling rivalry, just doesn't mesh with the rest of the movie.

Still, Uma Thurman, as the classy uber-babe who works with Vincent, and becomes his love interest, is especially lovely to look at. (She could sell just about anyone a luxury car.) And, more importantly, the bio-ethical and social issues Niccol contemplates in *Gattaca* are both timely and important.

Niccol's second film was one he wrote before starting *Gattaca*. But since it was the larger budget project, with a major star (Jim Carrey) attached, it was put into the hands of a more experienced helmer; namely, Peter Weir. That movie was *The Truman Show* (1998) and it was an award-winning success which garnered Niccol much acclaim, including an Oscar nomination for best original screenplay.

Weir's solid directing and Carrey's surprisingly poignant performance as the title patsy certainly helped to make this prophetic look at the public's insatiable appetite for "reality" television a hit. But it was Andrew Niccol's script that made the movie one of the more intelligent high-profile summer flicks of recent memory. Again, a protagonist strives for self-determination in a tightly controlled society. And again the movie tackles — if not completely successfully — several ethical issues related to identity and honesty.

It seems as though Niccol can't leave those themes behind. His latest writing/directing gig also explores media appetites, public images, and the essence of self, all in a would-be farce about fast-approaching technology in today's Hollywood. The movie is called *Simone* — or, *S1m0ne*, if you prefer. What I would have preferred is to have never seen this exceedingly dull and utterly toothless satire of Hollywood star-making.

The basic story of *Simone* involves a failed art-film director, Viktor Taransky (a scenery-chewing Al Pacino), who is ruined when his leading lady (Winona Ryder) walks off his big comeback movie, leaving it unfinished. In this alternate-universe tinseltown, where stars get to walk out on their contractual commitments and studios leave multi-million dollar projects unfinished, Taransky is in big trouble. Not a single actress (yeah, right!) is willing to step into the lead role of Viktor's tragic romance.

Just when it seems all, including Taransky's pricey beach house, is lost, Viktor inherits the life work of a demented computer scientist

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who had made it his mission to produce a completely lifelike synthespian. His creation, Sim(ulation) One, just happens to be a beauteous Malibu Barbie of a blonde who can, and will, do anything she is commanded to do, without question or complaint.

Viktor completes his film with his artificial ingénue. The movie becomes a hit, and Simone a meteoric international star. Rather than proclaim his technological breakthrough, Viktor tries to hide the fact that his new discovery exists only in cyberspace. The rest of *Simone* consists of Viktor exploiting his new star while hiding her "identity" from her adoring public. Then, when it becomes too elaborate of a ruse to sustain, he peevishly attempts to destroy his creation so that he can get back to reality.

What can I say about *Simone*, except that it is one of the most misguided film projects I have ever seen?

I mean, really. Did Mr. Niccol grow up on the Titan his *Gattaca* hero so wants to visit, or perhaps another faraway moon? Someone forgot to tell the filmmaker that skewering Hollywood for selling fakery is like taking Santa to task for his overly cheerful demeanor. Hollywood is a dream machine predicated upon visual trickery, after all. So the film's basic conceit has no inherent conflict or comedy in it.

Filmmakers have been creating fantastical CGI performers (like the "animated" Shrek and the "live-action" Yoda) for several years. The altering and augmenting of live actors with CGI effects is also common these days. A "Simone" is the next logical step — so why would Hollywood hide it? Answer: They wouldn't. They'd order up a six-page spread in *Entertainment Weekly* about their breakthrough in movie magic.

There will be, it is true, actual difficulties to overcome when "realistic" completely artificial actors are finally introduced into "human" dramas. But you'd never know it from Niccol's movie. Among the many issues Niccol could have addressed is the challenge "vactors" might represent to the art and livelihood of flesh-and-blood performers. Something on the order of Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s classic story, "The Darfsteller"(1955). I kept wanting one of Taransky's human actors to figure out what was going on and react. (Wouldn't you think a guy would get a little suspicious when his co-star didn't even show up, in person, for a love scene?)

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Or, here's another one: What about what it would mean for a man like Taransky to take on the attributes of a beautiful woman? Since the synthetic Simone is doing nothing more than mimicking a performance coming from her director/programmer, why didn't Niccol have some fun with what it would mean for a male filmmaker to be forced to actually get in touch with his feminine side?

Better yet, truly push the fantasy envelope and have the female synthespian develop a consciousness and will of her own, refusing to be the docile slave of her technosvengali. (Remember how much fun it was to watch the robotic performers of *Westworld* (1973) turn on their high-paying clientele? I always wished that Yul Brynner's gunslinger doll had managed to blow away Richard Benjamin's milquetoasty tourist!)

There are just so many interesting places Niccol could have gone with his story. And he didn't bother exploring a single one of them. Worse, the filmmaker seemed to go out of his way to make Simone the most vapidly beautiful yet emotionally blank creature ever to appear on film.

What's that about? Is it meant to be a slap in the face of the movie-going public? Well, if so, we are not quite as dumb as Mr. Niccol seems to believe. Julia Roberts — although not my favorite actress — is the biggest star of the moment, not because of the perfection of her beauty, but because of her infectious spirit and goofy grin, which light up the screen, even when she is playing (as she so often does) a passive-aggressive bitch. Impassive Barbie-ness is just not the stuff of superstardom.

Let's not forget, the most ambitious experiment in creating a quasi-live-action movie with synthespians was *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001). The film was visually exquisite, yet frustratingly inert. The quite lovely lead character, Dr. Aki Ross (voiced by the talented human actor, Ming-Na), just couldn't capture the hearts and minds of the viewing public, no matter what her feats of bravery and derring-do. She just didn't have enough personality.

On the written page, cyber-stars are just as much of a hard sell. William Gibson couldn't pull it off in *Idoru*. (Even if you liked Gibson's 1996 novel — and I did not — the title character, a virtual pop icon called Rei Toei, was not a complex and interesting character. She was a shadow figure making few appearances on the page and garnering

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even less interest. What was her attraction? Why would a human rock star want to "marry" her? Who knows? )

I could excuse Andrew Niccol for not quite capturing human charisma in a synthetic screen character...if he had actually used an artificial actor for the role of Simone. But despite the initial hype on the movie, and the coy closing credits which claim that Simone was played by "herself," the part of the new-fangled computerized mega-star was actually performed by a swimsuit and runway model from Canada named Rachel Roberts. The young woman acted out her part (with as few eye blinks as possible) and then Niccol's post-production team simply "Simonized" her look a bit — removing all blinks, altering her eye-color at will, and smoothing her already lovely complexion to the point of flawlessness.

Perhaps they also evened out her personality to the point of non-existence. More likely, Niccol purposefully hired an inexperienced actor and then coached her toward a flat performance. It was an obvious, and ultimately disastrous choice to make. Pacino's Taransky is certainly an uninteresting and unsympathetic character (as well as a seemingly terrible filmmaker). If we can't relate to him, we need at least to be charmed by his pixelated protégé. Andrew Niccol doesn't even allow his movie-going audience that modest pleasure.

The best Hollywood satires (David Mamet's *State and Main*, from 2000, comes to mind as a recent example) contrast the greed and corruption of the Hollywood dream machine with something more ordinary and honest. Comedy ensues when the real world and La La outlandishment interact. Considering the kind of thematic concerns Andrew Niccol has addressed in his previous films, I would have thought him a natural at telling such a tale. Unfortunately, the moviemaker seems to have lost himself among the countless counterfeits of Hollywood.

Jeepers, it's pretty bad when even your synthespian is a fake fake!

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*Alex Irvine's recent publications include his first novel,* A Scattering of Jades, *and a chapbook collection of several of his short stories. He has lived all over the US and is currently residing in Portland, Maine, with his wife and two kids. "Vandoise" shows his concern for the land Out West and the ways in which the stories survive over time.*

# Vandoise and the Bone Monster

## By Alex Irvine

1.

THEY WERE GOING TO HAVE to leave Colorado and go back East in the fall, and before they did, Jeff was determined that Cindy would see the old fort. And she wanted to, so one Sunday afternoon in August they hopped in the car and drove up I-25 almost to Wyoming. They passed it on the way, a huge, lumpy, toothlike clump of pale sandstone jutting up out of the yellow grass on the east side of the freeway. At the next exit Jeff doubled back on a dirt access road. "Excellent," he said. "I couldn't let you leave Colorado without seeing this."

Cindy looked out the window as they got closer to it. Tall spires of wind-carved rock formed rough walls, and inside what looked like towers loomed above the outer barrier.

"Did you bring a girlfriend here before?" she said, to tease him. She knew perfectly well that he'd first come here on his way to Montana for a backpacking trip through the Absarokas with his college friend Drew, but she liked to poke fun at him about previous girlfriends. He'd lived in Colorado for a few years before meeting her during a trip to Florida to go

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cave diving at Ichetucknee Springs, and Jeff had a tendency to point out places he'd gone with other girlfriends before he could think better of it. Lucky for him Cindy had a sense of humor.

As they pulled into the parking lot — just a wide spot in the road, really — Jeff saw an older man wearing a highway worker's orange vest loading the historical marker into the back of a green Department of Transportation pickup truck. They got out and walked over to him.

"Excuse me," Jeff said. "Getting a new marker?"

"No, huh-uh," the CDOT guy said as he looked up at them. His eyes were a pale gray in the deeply seamed and creased angles of his face, and bristle-brush gray hair stood up from his high forehead. Seeing him, Jeff thought of Depression-era photographs of Civilian Conservation Corps workers. "Just taking this one down. Shutting the whole site down."

"You're kidding me," Jeff said.

"Too many people. That sandstone erodes right away, you know. State decided they had to shut it down until they could figure out some way to limit access. I'm just up here finishing with the sign, then I'm going to lock that gate back up the road a ways. You passed it on your way in." He settled a tarp over the historical marker and cinched it down.

"Man." Jeff was saddened by this. He'd told Cindy about this place ever since they'd first come back to Colorado together. It was a natural fort, and had been the site of a tremendous massacre sometime in the nineteenth century, or maybe earlier. After a harsh winter, a Blackfeet hunting party came down out of the mountains, trespassing on Crow land. The marker hadn't said whether their hunt was successful, but it did say that the Crow caught wind of the incursion and chased the Blackfeet to these rocks, where the Blackfeet holed up and fought until they were slaughtered to the last man. Nobody knew how many of them had been killed, but it was likely in the hundreds.

The place had always seemed to Jeff to capture something essential about the Old West, the pre-pioneer West, before it had industrialized and grown crisscrossed with railroads and reservations: the iconic rocks rearing up from the prairie, a battle between peoples who believed themselves enemies, and now the process of making it into history. It was different in the East, where suburban children had swimming lessons in Walden Pond and all that remained of the Boston Tea Party was a plaque

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on a building near the waterfront. Out here, the past hadn't yet been buried under brick and concrete, and history was as real as an arrowhead scuffed up from the side of the road. There might still be living people who had talked to men and women who had heard about this massacre when it happened. It was close enough to touch.

He'd spun it all out for Cindy before, and was about to do it again since the marker was under a tarp on its way to a warehouse in Denver somewhere, but before he could she asked the CDOT guy, "Are you sure we can't look around before you go?"

"Sorry, I can't let you do that. Site's closed."

"Please," she said. "We're moving to Pennsylvania next week, and who knows when we'll get out here again?"

"Can't do it."

She cocked her head and the wind blew her hair across her face. "What's your name?"

"Jarrett Bigelow." He stuck out his hand and watched her closely as she shook. Jeff watched both of them, knowing that some kind of negotiation was taking place but unable to quite figure out how. Bigelow had calluses the color of the dust that blew over the road.

"Mister Bigelow," she said, "I'm Cindy Gellner, and this is Jeff Loville. Jeff and I have been together for a year and a half. I'm going to med school at Penn starting in two weeks, and we're probably going to get married as soon as he finds a teaching job around Philadelphia. Then it's kids and careers, and by the time we're able to get back out here this whole thing might have blown away, you know what I mean? And besides," she pointed at Jeff without taking her eyes off Bigelow's face, "he's been here before. Do you want me to have to suffer through a lifetime of him saying, 'Jeez, Cindy, I sure wish you could have seen that old natural fort back when we were in Colorado'? You're a nice man; you don't want me to suffer like that, do you?"

He looked from her to Jeff and back. Then he sighed. "Tell you what. You go on up to Cheyenne, buy yourself a cheeseburger, kill the afternoon. Come on back down here around seven, and park off the side of the road by the gate. I reckon no one will know the difference."

She beamed at him, and Jeff found himself grinning too. "Thanks," he said.

"If I ever come back here and find your names carved in these rocks,"

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Bigelow said, "I'm going to come looking for you all the way in Philadelphia."

"We just want to see it," Jeff said.

"Seven o'clock," Bigelow said by way of an answer. He got into his truck and sat pointedly waiting for them to leave.

It was about ten after seven when they pulled up to the locked gate.

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"Trespassing on state property," Jeff said.

Cindy got out of the car. "As far as the Indians are concerned, the people who put up the fence are trespassers too. Come on."

They walked the hundred yards or so down the road on the other side of the gate, Jeff with a strange jumpy feeling the whole time on the back of his neck. He'd done his share of sneaking into places he wasn't supposed to be, but it was different when you were stepping onto a mass grave, the site of a massacre. The story, like so many others from the Old West, lay thinly buried, needing only a scuffing footstep to jar it loose.

In the evening light, with hardly any traffic on I-25 and the nearest house two or three miles away on a ridge to the east, the old rocks looked like they might just have thrust up through the ground the day before. A wind from the mountains ruffled the tall prairie grass, blowing hard enough to drown out the sounds of wheels on pavement from the interstate.

A seam in the side of the near wall, with worn hand-width grooves at waist level and a sprinkling of initials scattered around it like warning sigils, led them into the interior. Inside, the air was dead still and the sandy floor mostly empty of grass. The walls were scored with decades of initials and pledges, and charred stubs of firewood stuck out of the sand. Broken glass crunched under their feet. The rocks were laid out almost exactly like the plan of a castle: an external ring with towers spaced around it, a sandy courtyard just inside, and a central keep. If I'd lived around here when I was a kid, Jeff thought, you wouldn't have been able to keep me out of this place. Wonder why the local Renaissance festival hasn't tried to take it over.

Cindy climbed part of the way up one of the internal pillars and found herself a hollowed-out place to sit. Jeff climbed up next to her, and they looked out over the rolling plain to the east. On the other side of the dirt

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road, a barbed-wire fence ran north and south as far as they could see; at the crest of a ridge to the east, a low house looked out over a few head of cattle. If they turned around, they could see I-25, and on the other side of it more yellow grass and barbed wire, and a long way off the upthrust grays and greens of the Rocky Mountains. Longs Peak loomed huge in the southwest, its shoulders snowy even in August. The sun was low over the mountains; in another half-hour or so the sky would flood, slowly, from east to west, with that brilliant cobalt that existed nowhere in the world but the Front Range of Colorado, during a few minutes of a few evenings in the summer.

"Take away the freeway and you step back a hundred years," Cindy said wistfully.

Jeff imagined fleeing here and taking up positions along the walls, looking down the shafts of your arrows at the enemy you knew would kill you sooner or later. Below him, on that sand, men had fought and died because some of them were hungry. "Ghosts," he said. "This place is full of them."

"Ghosts are just history," Cindy said. "That's what this place is full of. Ghosts are what you feel when you realize how much bigger and older everything is."

"Okay," Jeff said, and thought she was probably right. But it still felt like ghosts to him. They sat for a while listening to the wind in the rocky spires and feeling the rock warm around them with their body heat. Jeff kept wanting to tell her things that he remembered from the historical marker, but he was smart enough not to. If she wanted to know, she'd ask, and if she didn't he would just be ruining the moment by spouting. This is the kind of moment that you remember, he thought. Sneaking into a historic massacre site just to sit with your girlfriend and listen to the wind in the old, old, worn-down rocks.

Then they heard footsteps, and looked down to see Jarrett Bigelow at the base of the formation where they were sitting. "Believe you're trespassing," he said.

"But you said — " Jeff began before Bigelow cut him off.

"A little joke, son. Relax. Didn't you see my headlights?"

Jeff and Cindy looked at each other. "Some lookout you'd make," she said.

Bigelow chuckled. "I just checked back to see if you'd actually come

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back. Since you did, I thought I'd drop in and tell you a little story about this place." He looked at Jeff. "Did you tell her what's on the marker?"

"Everything I could remember," Jeff said. "It's been a while since I was here."

"But you got the Blackfeet and the Crow and the massacre, right?"

"He did," Cindy said.

"Okay." Bigelow paused. "There room for a third up there?"

"Sure," they said, and he climbed up and sat next to Jeff, who although not the jealous type was glad that he hadn't sat on Cindy's side of the rock.

"It seems a damn shame to close this place down," Bigelow said. "I used to come here when I was a boy. Found arrowheads all over the place back then, in the thirties." He shifted a little to point back toward the freeway. "See over there?"

Following his gesture, Jeff and Cindy saw another cluster of sandstone rocks, lower and more broken down than the one that offered them their vantage. "That one there used to be as big as this one," Bigelow said. "And there used to be a whole long series of walls and towers between them. This whole formation was huge back then, before they put the expressway in." He paused and gave first Cindy and then Jeff a long appraising look. "I'm retiring from CDOT next week," he said. "I asked them if I could come up and take the marker down, since they were doing it anyway and I hadn't been back here in forty years. I live down in Castle Rock now, and don't have any reason to come up this way.

"But I have a story about this place, and I've been carrying it around for about as long as I care to, and since you decided to come traipsing on in here, you're the ones I'm going to tell it to. Fair enough?"

"Sounds great," Cindy said, and Jeff was nodding with her. Bigelow nodded, ground out his cigarette, and stuck the butt in his shirt pocket. Then Jeff and Cindy leaned against the crooked spire next to a carved heart, and they listened to wind and passing traffic as Jarrett Bigelow told his story.

## 2.

I was working on the road crew when they built the highway through here in the fifties. Now the environmentalists would make 'em figure

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some way to cut it around, but back then they saw that it was a straight line on the map from Denver to Cheyenne and figured it might as well be a straight line on the prairie too. Course that meant we had to blast the middle out of the old fort here, but nobody cared about that except a bunch of dead Indians, and they didn't drive cars.

So we were out here one morning, and I was wiring up some dynamite in this old cave that used to be under there, and I heard some scuffing near the entrance. I looked up and this old boy out of the damn Wild West came skulking in. "Don't talk," he said, "until you've heard what I have to say."

"All right," I said. "I'm listening."

He held out a canvas bag and I took it. "Look inside," he said.

I did, and saw gold. Some coins, some nuggets, even some little oilcloth bags I figured must have been full of dust. I'm not sure what I would have said if I could have made my mouth work, but it didn't matter because I couldn't.

"All yours," the old boy said, "if you do one thing for me."

"What's that?"

"When you blow this cave," he said, "I need to be in it."

Just for a split second, I thought about it. Before the foreman blew the cave, he'd send someone through to make sure the coast was clear. I could probably make sure it was me, but then I'd have to come on back out and tell my boss that there was nobody down in the cave and stand there while he buried this crazy old man under a million tons of sandstone.

"You know I can't do that," I said.

"I know you can. Listen to me, boy. How old do you think I am?"

I shone my flashlight on him. He had that kind of seamed face and bristly hair you get when you've spent your life outside, but his eyes were bright and there were still hard lines around his jaw. "Sixty," I said.

"Hell," he said, "I spent more than sixty years collecting the gold in that bag. You know how many abandoned mining camps there still are up in those mountains? My name is Vandoise Castleton, and I am one hundred and four years old. Born in St. Charles, Missouri, in eighteen hundred and fifty-one. My father was a trapper who lost a foot in one of his own traps and my mother always meant to be a schoolteacher but had me instead. And I am ready to die."

My breath sort of caught in my throat, and I looked around the cave.

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It was kind of a windy seam with a big bubble in the middle, and in that bubble was a little pond full of the blackest water you ever saw. The floor was all covered with tin cans and burnt ends of sticks. An old shirt wadded up on a rock. I was a young man. I wanted to marry a girl named Charlotte Cassidy whose father was a professor at the university in Fort Collins. I'd never killed anyone, or thought of it.

There was a damned lot of gold in that sack.

"Why did you have to bring this to me?"

"I brought this to these rocks, boy, and the ghosts of all them dead redskins," he said. "Don't have nothing to do with you."

"Well now it does," I said. "You're asking me to kill you."

He reached out a hand and caught my shirt. "No. I am asking you to let me die."

Something in his voice caught me up short. I wasn't sure what to say, and finally I stammered out, "You don't look that old, mister. Why do you want to die?"

"There's something following me that takes death into itself," he said. "It'll kill me if it ever finds me, but until then it keeps me young. It eats death, I think. Every time it gets close to me, it eats a little bit of the death I have coming."

"Well, if you want to die, why don't you just let it find you?"

In the darkness I saw an odd gleam in his eye. "'Cause I aim to take it with me."

I tried to look away from him and couldn't. Finally I said, "You get out of here, old man. I can't let you blow up in the cave. I'd lose my job."

For a long, drawn-out minute he just looked at me. "This thing won't let me alone," he said, "and I won't leave you alone either. You wait and see."

"You get out of here," I said again, braver than I felt.

He did, and I finished up wiring the charge and came up out of the cave.

At lunch, old Skyler Vasquez came over to me. He'd been working the road crew since before I was born. "What did that old boy want?"

"You saw him?" I said. "You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"Oh, I might," he said, "if that was Vandoise."

Skyler's answer caught me by surprise. "You know him?"

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"Let me tell you a story," Skyler said. "Then we'll see who has trouble believing who."

## 3.

I was working in the Union Pacific freight yards back in the twenties, before the Depression. One of the things we done in those days on weekends was head down to the old fort to drink beer up on the rocks and swim in the pool down in that cave. Me and them other fellows on the freightyard crew tried every way we could think of to get some girls to come down with us and swim in that pool. Most of 'em wouldn't do it. Either they was scared of the old Indian legends or they was just a little too goody two-shoes to be out on the prairie with us rough old boys. But some would. Especially some nights.

This one afternoon, I remember it was a Saturday because I had the next morning off unless I wanted to go to church, which I wouldn't unless I did something especially sinful with Inez Fuentes, who was my steady girl. Me and Inez had been swimming. She made me turn around when she got out of the pool and while I was trying to peek so she wouldn't notice, that was when I saw the wires poking out from under a rock.

I followed them and found a dozen sticks of dynamite wedged into a crack in the wall, and I don't have to tell you that took the starch right out of me. I went running up and out of the cave in just my skivvies and caught sight of them wires curling around the edge of this big formation we called the Castle. At the end of them, up on one of the Castle's ledges, was a plunger, and both wires was wrapped around its terminals.

Well I didn't have nothing to cut with so I set to work unwrapping them wires as fast as I could, and I had just got the first one off when a shadow fell across me and I looked up to see old Vandoise.

"Why do you have to do that?" he said.

I hopped up and socked him in the mouth. He went down and stayed down, and if he'd gotten up I was ready to give him another one. "What the hell are you doing?" I shouted. If I'd had shoes on I'd have kicked him.

See, Vandoise was no stranger to the old fort. All the girls was afraid of him because of the way he hung around there and I'll admit I didn't like him much either. We'd been seeing him off and on for about a year then,

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mostly in the middle of the day, and he'd asked around about the old fort. All them Blackfeet slaughtered because they'd come too far down out of the mountains.

"I'm trying to save myself," he said. Lying on the ground with blood on his teeth.

I thought he was a religious nut. One of them Carry Nation types who went around busting up saloons. I got my old preacher's voice in my head, from when I was a boy: *dens of iniquity*, he always used to say. Maybe old Vandoise was blowing up the cave because he thought it was a den of iniquity. "Jesus don't want you to blow us up in that cave, you crazy old bastard," I told him.

Vandoise smiled. The late-afternoon sun caught the blood in his mouth. "Jesus forgot about me a long time ago, kid. I'm on my own."

"What for do you want to blow up the cave?" I shouted. He wasn't making any sense. I still wanted to kick him.

"I'll tell you," he said. "I'll tell you, and then you won't think I'm so crazy."

## 4.

I was working for Professor O.C. Marsh in 1870, when we went out from Fort Wallace to dig along the banks of the Smoky Hill River. This was in Kansas. We found mosasaurs, great fishlike things with long bony jaws, and all kind of other things we'd seen before, but we also found a hollow bone like a bird's, and when we came back the next year we found enough more of those hollow bones to put them together into a flying dinosaur. A dragon! we all said. Dragons in America! I always thought of Red Cloud and Crazy Horse and them, or their ancestors, fighting against these monsters come out of the sky. I didn't know so much about how long ago the dinosaurs had been there.

Anyway, a few years later I happened to be working for Marsh again, this time keeping an eye on E.D. Cope, who was a Quaker and another paleontologist. He and Marsh hated each other. It didn't start out that way, but by the time I'm talking about, they'd developed a good healthy dislike, and they'd started sending folks like me around to the other's camp to see what could be done, if you take my meaning.

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Well, in science publication means priority. We learned that early on, working for either Marsh or Cope. Both of 'em were mad to publish. In such a hurry that they weren't always able to check things out the way they might've in less pressing circumstances.

So one of the things that they hired fellows like me to do was maybe find a sample and tinker with it just a little bit. Move a bone that was here over there, maybe, or take away the middle toe from all four feet. If I was working for Marsh and I did this, then we'd leave sign all around the bones so Cope would come across them. He'd dig 'em out and publish with what he had, and then as soon as he'd done that Marsh'd come back with another publication that explained all of the things that Cope had gotten wrong. They did this to each other more'n once.

It happened once over in Morrison, Colorado, that I came across a site that bore unmistakable signs that Cope's men had been digging around. Marks on the rock, tracks everywhere, piles of sifted dirt. So I looked a little closer and damned if I didn't find a fossil, most of a *Dryptosaurus*. The one that Cope called *Laelaps* his whole life even after Marsh told him that was already the name of a spider. *Dryptosaurus* was a mean, jumpy-looking critter, all teeth and claws, and this one was in real good shape, practically all there except for Cope's boys had given it new anklebones that made it look like the extra toes they'd added belonged there.

I was perhaps a little too proud of having spotted this, even though I'd been in the dinosaur business fifteen years by that time — this was 1884 — and if I'd missed something like that Marsh would never have hired me again. So I decided I would let Cope's boys know that I was onto them. I was traveling with a wagon full of bones that we had all seen before, we being Marsh's boys, and I thought I could add a few of those into that old *Dryptosaurus* and have a fine time, and maybe add a little humor to the situation, which it could sorely use. Nobody was ever killed over them bones, but guns were drawn, I can tell you that, and there were plenty of fights.

What I had in the wagon were a whole lot of ribs from some damn thing I couldn't remember, most of a sail from a *Dimetrodon*, and a near-complete set of wings off a *Pterodactyl*. Nearly sixteen feet across.

The sun went down and I took them wingbones back to Drypto's resting place there. There was a big waxing moon, almost full, and I spent

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the night nipping a bottle of whiskey and adding a fine-looking pair of wings to Mister *Dryptosaurus*. I made them a little more substantial with some *Dimetrodon* spines, and just for fun I took out all Drypto's teeth and stuck in a few from a *Hadrosaurus* that were rattling around under the seat of my wagon.

Right before sunrise, I laid some dirt over him, stood up to brush off my hands, and nearly pissed myself when I saw the man on the ridge sighting down the barrel of his rifle at me.

"You step on back from there," he said, and I knew him right away.

"There's no call to bring guns into it, Farley Sheets," I said. "You left him there for me to see, after all, and I was just going along with your joke."

"No joke this time, Vandoise," Farley said. The rifle barrel never moved. "Step on back."

I did, and five or six other men came creeping out of the brush. "What did you do to it?" Farley asked me.

Well, there was no way I was going to tell him after he pointed a damn rifle at me. "Took a look to see what was what," I said, "but those new anklebones of yours wouldn't have fooled a blind man."

He kept looking at me, and there was a time there when I thought he was going to shoot. I don't mind telling you, that hurt my feelings; Farley and I went back a long way in the Bone Wars, and we had always kept it professional. Then he said, "Step on back," and I said, "I heard you," and I stepped further back, and saw that one of the men in Farley's party was an Indian.

The Indian was decked out like for a dance or a powwow, beads and furs and everything. His church clothes. It was a mystery to me what would get him out in the middle of the night wearing his finest. Eagle feathers in his hair, paint on his forehead, and something I'd never seen before: little bones woven into a braid that hung down over his ear.

Farley called down. "Should we check it out?"

Another of his men repeated the question to the Indian. It wasn't any Indian language I knew, and by that time I knew bits of quite a few. The Indian shook his head and said something back.

"He says no, the cover can't be disturbed when the sun's about to come up. We're gonna have to try it as is."

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Hearing that, Farley looked like he might shoot me again. I stood real still beside my wagon and kept my mouth shut, discretion being — as the poet said — the better part of staying alive.

"Well, do it, then," Farley said. He looked over his shoulder. "The sun's about up."

Farley's man said something to the Indian, who put a drum under his arm and a kind of little wooden flute in his mouth. He started to sing around the flute while tapping on the drum, which had some kind of bangles hanging from it so it thumped and clinked at the same time, and then once in a while he quit singing and blew into the flute, which seemed like it changed notes even if he didn't finger the stops.

I was so busy watching him that I didn't even see the bone monster come up out of the ground. One minute he was singing, the next he was dropping the flute out of his mouth.

I looked where he was looking, and there was Mister Drypto.

It was improved by the wings, I must say. Claw-footed and taller than a man, with pterodactyl wings that I'd added some meat to with spines from a *Dimetrodon*. And little peg teeth from a *Hadrosaur*. It was at the same time the most ridiculous animal contraption you ever saw, and a sight out of a fossil hunter's bad dreams. A bone monster.

It cocked its head like a bird, spread its wings, and flew. It had no flesh, but it flew.

The Indian was closest, and the first to die. It fell on him like an eagle on a rabbit, hooked its claws into him, and pulled him up into the air. When it bit down on him, those peg teeth crunched his skull like hard candy.

Right then everyone else started to run, and it caught every last one of them, not even flying really. It took long soaring bounds, caught them in its claws, and killed them.

Except me and Farley. We stood still, and when it had killed the other six men, it looked around, craning its neck and clacking the bones of its wings. Looking for us, but it couldn't see us when we weren't moving. Farley and I looked at each other, moving only our eyes, and I saw him understanding the same thing I was.

At that moment sunrise broke over the ridge and, I swear to the Lord, the bone monster disappeared. Sunlight struck it, and sort of shined through it, and then it faded away and was gone.

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It was a long time before Farley or I moved, though, and when I finally spoke I was half-expecting to hear it invisibly leaping onto me.

"I am damned glad you didn't shoot me, Farley," I said.

"I will never forgive myself," he replied. "You put wings and peg teeth on my dinosaur I was going to sell to P.T. Barnum."

"Is that what you had your medicine man there for?"

"You bet it is. He said he did this all the time, raised earth spirits and whatnot, and I said could you do it so it would listen to me, and he said he could, and I offered him ten percent of what Barnum was going to offer me." Farley gave me the fish-eye. "And if you don't think Barnum would pay for a walking dinosaur skeleton, you ain't got the sense God gave a mule."

"He might have," I agreed. "But not if it turned invisible and disappeared."

The rattle of bones shut us both up. It was closer to me now, much closer, and I thought how foolish I had been for assuming it was gone just because I couldn't see it. If those were the rules, it never would have come out of the ground in the first place. I froze and waited to feel its claws hooking around my ribs.

Another rattle, and another, and I figured out that it was still standing more or less where it had been when it disappeared. Could it hear us? Why wasn't it coming after us? Did the sunlight blind it? I could see all the same questions running through Farley's head.

"Farley," I said, "I don't think it can move right now, and I'm not waiting until it can."

"You go on ahead," he said, "and I'll see if you're right."

I did, and Mister Drypto the Bone Monster didn't come after me, and I didn't see Farley again until 1906.

He surprised me in a saloon behind the post office in Vermillion, up in Dakota. I was slouched at the bar — you get to slouching when there's an invisible bone monster chasing you for twenty-two years, it is a frost of cares, as the poet says — and he walked right up, sat down, and ordered a whiskey before I could even notice who he was.

I had always figured on having to kill Farley the next time we crossed paths, since I had ruined his plan to strike it rich with what by 1906 had become Barnum and Bailey, but he didn't seem to have held a grudge. He

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sipped his whiskey as cool as can be, turned to me, and said, "Vandoise, I have beat that damn monster for twenty-two years. Know why?"

"If I were to guess, I'd say because it's been chasing me," I said.

"Hell, no," he said, and sipped his whiskey again. That particular saloon wasn't known for the quality of its mash, and it was odd behavior coming from a man like Farley. I had difficulty picturing myself killing a man who sipped his whiskey. "I know what makes it hunt," Farley said between sips.

"Do tell," I said.

I had my own theory about that, which was that Mister Drypto was distracted by the presence of mass death. Because of this theory, for which my only evidence was the fact that I hadn't been dismembered that first day and had maintained possession of all four limbs during the years since, I had spent the years between 1884 and 1906 wandering from battlefield to battlefield, massacre site to massacre site, relying on intuition and what the poet calls man's inhumanity to man to keep the bone monster far enough off my trail that I could live. I had been to Wounded Knee and Tippecanoe, Shiloh and Little Big Horn, Sand Creek and every other place of misery I could think of, and somewhere in that time spent among the dead I had stopped living myself. I decided right then, with bad whiskey on my tongue and Farley Sheets hardly getting his mustache wet, that I had to get rid of that damned bone monster once and for all. Fare thee well, Mister Drypto. Back to the ground for you.

But I was right about it being distracted by death. Once in Wyoming I had fallen asleep under a scaffold, and when I woke up I could hear its weight on the planks over my head. Close enough to touch. Through the gaps I watched the bone monster become visible as the sun went down, and I saw it nuzzling the beam where the nooses were tied every Friday. The problem was, once it got used to a place, all the death didn't distract it anymore, so I had to keep leading it around until it started to forget places and I could start the whole route over again.

"During the day, when it's invisible," Farley said, "we're invisible to it too. It can't see the world, really, so it has to move real slow. Same thing at night, I think, only at night I think it sees a little better. It's gotten close to me then, but during the day if I'm moving fast, I can't ever tell it's around."

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He looked like he was afraid to let go the next words on his tongue, so I did it for him. "But dawn and dusk."

His eyes locked onto mine. We understood each other. "Dawn and dusk," he said, and sipped at his whiskey. Then he had a thought. "That shaman. You know what he did to make that spell work?"

"Can't say I know too much about shaman spells," I said.

"There's a place down south of Cheyenne, a big natural stone fort. Long time ago, I'm not sure exactly when, a whole mess of Blackfeet Indians got themselves massacred there by the Crow."

Another massacre site. Another place where Mister Drypto could be distracted. I was grateful to Farley for letting me know about it. When he went on, though, I started to be more than grateful.

"This old shaman told me he was there when it happened. He said he lay among those dead redskins while the Crow had their fun, and this is what he told me. 'I felt all of their deaths, one by one, going into me and settling there,' he said. 'How many hundred dead men I carry around inside me.' We found him up in Montana when we was looking for someone who we heard could raise up the dead. One of the boys, I can't take credit for it myself, said 'Hell, we should raise up one of them dinosaurs and sell it to Barnum's show,' and once I'd heard that I couldn't think about anything else. So we went looking, and we found this shaman, and while we were riding down through Casper I got him drunk and he told me about all them dead Blackfeet he had inside him, how he thought he could pour them into the dinosaur bones and finally be rid of them. I thought that was fine, if it took a couple of hundred dead Indians so I could sell a dinosaur to Barnum's circus that was okay with me." He looked up at me with bleary gray eyes. "Then you had to come along with your damned joke."

I wanted to say something to distract him, to get him to stop thinking about this place down south of Cheyenne where the shaman had breathed death in. I was afraid that if he thought about it for too long he'd start thinking exactly what I was thinking, and I was thinking that if I could get Mister Drypto there and distract him, maybe I could be rid of him once and for all. He had come from there, really, or at least the infernal energies that gave him his horrible life had, and it seemed just that he should end there too.

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Then I reconsidered. What if Farley and I could work together to trick Mister Drypto?

"Farley," I said. "We have to go to this old fort, you and I."

His eyes grew big as platters and he looked around like the bone monster might be under the piano. "You're crazy," he said. "Go back there where its power came from?"

"It's always distracted with massacres. We could get the drop on it. End it where it began."

"What if that massacre don't distract it, though? What if it gets stronger? What if we go there thinking it's going to do what it always does and find out that all of a sudden it can see us in the daytime? You want to take that chance?"

I looked at him for a long time, watching the little tremble at the corner of his mouth, the way the pupils of his eyes didn't seem like they were quite the same size. "I think I do," I said. "I think I would risk quite a damned lot to be rid of that bone monster once and for all."

"Well, you go ahead then," he said, and took another dainty sip of whiskey. "I'll notify your people when it gets you."

"Goddammit, Farley," I said, "I'll stand you another one if you'll just drink that one like a man."

"Don't mind if I do," he said, and drained his glass, and at that moment I figured out that Farley Sheets was churchmouse poor. And even though he had tried to leave me to be eaten by a bone monster that his own Indian shaman had brought to life, I felt sorry for the man. As it says in the Good Book, let him drink, and forget his poverty.

A man reads the Bible some when he's being pursued by a bone monster.

When I left Farley Sheets in that saloon, I made a beeline for the old fort with Mister Drypto hot on my heels. Death is thick around here, and he's very much interested. Rattles his wings and sniffs around like a bloodhound tracking Jesse James. I looked everything over well enough to have an inkling of a plan and then got out of there while I still could. I knew Mister Drypto would follow, and I knew that eventually he would forget that place and I could lure him back.

I was right, but it took me nearly twenty years, and at some point during those years the bone monster got Farley Sheets.

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The bartender at a saloon in Deadwood told me, and I am man enough to say I cried a little bit, and mine own tears did scald, as the poet says. I cried not so much for drunken double-crossing Farley Sheets as for myself. It was just Mister Drypto and me now. It had taken him thirty-five years to get Farley, and now he had just me to concentrate on before he would have killed everyone who was there when he rose up out of the ground.

Through years of being chased and watching the landscape of the West grow crisscrossed with fences and speckled with cities, I had developed certain ambitions. Most of them I have never realized. At one point I thought of killing Farley Sheets myself, but then I figured out that without him, Mister Drypto would be able to focus all of his attention on me. Then I wanted to kill that medicine man, but I remembered that Mister Drypto had already done for him, and I had to admit that if Farley Sheets had offered me a handful of gold to raise up a dinosaur, and I knew how, I would have done exactly as he did.

Gradually my desires pared themselves down to a few bare essentials. I wanted Mister Drypto not to be around anymore. I wanted to settle down in one place. Get married. Be able to wake up in the morning without listening for the sound of that damned rattling, that clacking. I haven't had a good night's sleep in more than forty years, and just once I want to lie down at night without worrying that I'll die when the sun rises next. A frost of cares.

That bone monster is around here right now. I've lured him back. And if I'm in that cave come sundown, he will be too, and I can end it for the both of us. That's all I want to do. He's been chasing me for so long, and I've been running from him for so long. It must stop.

Clear the girls out of there and just leave me alone tonight. Please. That's all I'm asking.

## 5.

Well, I couldn't believe that story, and I was still half-convinced that this old man was just a pervert come sniffing after the girls that was swimming down in the cave. And I didn't much like the way he'd said *redskin*. There's Indians in my family on my mother's side.

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So I said, "You get out of here, old-timer, or you're going to find more trouble than some bone monster. Go on. Get."

He looked at me and I realized how I was talking to him. I wasn't no angel when I was a boy, but my parents still brought me up right, and here I was shaming this old man like he was a stray dog. "You can't just blow up the cave," I said, trying to make amends a bit. "You just can't."

"I wouldn't have blown it up with you or the girls in it," he said. "I wouldn't."

"I know," I said.

He sighed, long and kind of shuddery, like he was trying not to cry. "It's a long time before I can come back here," he said. "It takes Mister Drypto a long time to forget a place, and I can't bring him back here until he has forgotten. What if it takes another twenty years? What if he kills me before then?"

There wasn't much I could say to that. "I'm real sorry."

The sun touched the mountains right then and I heard a whirring, rattling kind of noise that had my balls creeping right up into my collar. Over on the wall of the old fort, the one that faces out toward the mountains, I saw something silhouetted against the setting sun. The light was too bright for me to get a good look at it.

"Don't move," old Vandoise said. "Don't even breathe if you can help it."

I didn't. I shut my eyes and held my breath and waited.

When I couldn't hold my breath any longer, I opened my eyes. The sun was nearly gone and I couldn't see no bone monster. Vandoise was gone too.

Now I'm a bit of an amateur historian and I did some checking over the years, but I never found anyone named Vandoise in any records. So I figured this old boy was just pulling my leg. The thing wouldn't let go of me, though, and a few years ago, 1950 I think it was, I heard of an old collection of newspapers at an estate sale up in Edgemont, South Dakota. I went up to check it out. And I'll be damned if I didn't find an article clipped out of the *Black Hills Prospector* talking about a man named Farley Sheets who was found dead on the banks of a creek out in Buffalo Gap. The article decided wolves or mountain lions must have done it even

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though it was 1919 and there weren't many of either left in those parts anymore. My eye was caught by a particular detail: wedged behind the hinge of Farley Sheets's jaw was a fossilized brontosaurus tooth. The reporter speculated that it had been tied on a cord around his neck and was crushed in there by the force of whatever bit him.

On the same page there was an article about Eisenhower going across the country to scout out ways to move armies or some such. He spent a few days in Wyoming before arriving on the West Coast on September fifth that year. Just thought it was a little odd because we're both working for Eisenhower building the interstates. A historical coincidence. That newspaper connects us to Farley Sheets. And old Vandoise.

## 6.

It was about time to get back to work, and I wadded up my lunch bag and threw it in the ditch. "A fossilized brontosaur's tooth, huh?"

Skyler nodded. "That's what it said."

"That old boy was crazy."

"You would be too. Anyway, that's why he came up to you today. I'll give you dollars to pesos that he wants you to kill him, and don't be surprised if he comes back."

Skyler paused like he was about to admit to something shameful. Then he said, "I thought about that old boy being chased by that bone monster, and I felt a little bad that I didn't blow him up the way he wanted me to." Then he looked up at me and bared his teeth. "I stood right over there and waited for that monster to come for me, Jarrett Bigelow. You watch out what you let old Vandoise get you into."

I nodded at him, but I didn't tell him about the gold.

Two weeks later, everything was different. It had rained a bit so the blasting was rescheduled, and we hadn't set off the charges I'd laid in the cave. And Charlotte was late, if you take my meaning. It looked like I was going to be a father. I wanted to marry her before her father found out — not that I was worried he'd do anything, since it never occurred to me to worry about being shot by a history professor, but still I wanted him to think of me as a man who would do the right thing by his daughter. And

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this was all begging the question of what my mother would think. No sir, it was best to marry Charlotte right away, run off and do it and then fudge the math on the other end when the baby came due. She was all for it; the only problem was I didn't have any money, and neither one of us wanted to live with a set of in-laws.

What with all this, when Vandoise showed up next to me while I was taking a leak out on the other side of the old fort one day, I was a little more ready to listen to what he had to say.

"You look me in the eye and tell me you want to die," I said.

He looked me dead in the eye and said, "More than I have ever wanted to live, I want to die tonight."

"Now tell me something else. Do you have family? I won't do this if you're going to leave people."

"I have survived all three of my sisters," he said, "and thanks to Mister Drypto I never married."

I couldn't believe I was saying it, but I was saying it. "All right then. A man has to make his own decisions."

"A man does," Vandoise agreed. "At least I am left that."

"The cave's wired to blow, but I don't think we're supposed to do it today." I had reset and checked the charge myself that morning, and I'd be lying if I said that bag of gold didn't cross my mind a time or two. Well, here was my second chance to do the right thing. "If we are, I'll figure something else out. When do you want me to do it?"

"At sundown," he said. "Right when the sun touches the mountains, you count to one hundred, and then you push that plunger. You hear me?"

"Sundown," I said. "Count to one hundred."

Vandoise caught my wrist as I went to leave him there. "If this dynamite doesn't go off when I want it to, boy, this thing that's going to kill me? It'll have your scent next. You make sure and blow this cave."

"I will," I said.

"All right then." He let go of my wrist. "I may not seem grateful, son, but you are doing me a kindness. Remember that."

I couldn't say anything else to him; my mouth was seized up again. Holding onto the canvas bag, I worked my way around the rocks to a good place to hide the gold. Then I came out and told the foreman that the charges in the cave were all wired. He said all right, we'll check it again

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and blow in the morning. I started to argue, but then I thought how that would look, and I thought of all that gold hidden in a crack in the rocks. "That sounds good," I said. "We knocking off then?"

There were a few things to clean up, but it was late in the afternoon and everyone was in a hurry to get on home. Right as the foreman was padlocking the shed where the blasting equipment was, I realized I needed an excuse to stay. I'd hitched a ride in with some of the boys from up in Cheyenne, and it was a ten-mile walk.

A friend of mine named Barry called from his old pickup. "You go on ahead," I called back. I jogged over to the truck. "I'm going to look around a bit for arrowheads." My girl in Fort Collins had a younger brother who could never get enough arrowheads.

"How you going to get back to Cheyenne?" Barry asked.

"I'll give you five dollars to come back and pick me up in two hours," I said.

"And beer's on you tonight?"

I thought of all the gold in that sack. "Beer's on me. Give me a cigarette."

He shook me out a Chesterfield and I lit up as he roared away.

I climbed up to a high spot in the old fort and looked out across the plains toward the Medicine Bow Mountains. On the other side of them was a town called Walden. Sometimes I headed up that way to fish in the Michigan River. As I smoked Barry's Chesterfield I thought about that old man, down there in the cave waiting to die, and I almost got down off the rocks and went to tell him I wouldn't do it. But that look in his eye.

He wants to, I told myself, and I spent a long time turning that thought over in my mind, trying to see if it was a real belief or something I was trying to convince myself so I wouldn't feel so guilty when I dropped the plunger.

It seemed real. That look in his eye. *There's something following me that takes death into itself,* he'd said. What kind of something was that?

The sun was low over the mountains. There would be long shadows over the Michigan River, and it was time to break into the blasting shed. I worked the lock with a piece of wire and took the plunger over to a little hollow about a hundred yards from the cave entrance. It only took a minute to wind the wires around the plunger's terminals, and then I just

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sat there watching the sun settle toward the mountains. There was a wind in the grass, and I imagined I heard the voices of all the dead redskins whose ghosts still lived on these plains. One, I said softly. Two. Three.

Over by the cave I saw something, and then in the next instant I thought I'd just gotten grit in my eye. I blinked, rubbed my hand across my eyes. While they were closed, just for a moment, I thought I heard a rattling sound. A clacking on the breeze, like the maracas the Mex girls played sometimes. When I opened my eyes again, there was just a flash of movement by the cave entrance. If that's the old man, I thought, and he's just chickened out, I'm keeping his damn gold. He can just try to take it away. But there was nothing after that first ghost of motion.

Eight-four. Eighty-five. Eighty-six.

A shout came from the cave, but I couldn't understand the words. Then there was another noise, and I don't know what it was, but if I live to be a hundred I don't ever want to hear it again.

One hundred, I said to myself, and depressed the plunger.

Smoke and dust shot out of the cave entrance, and there was a big damned boom even though it was muffled from being underground. Then that whole part of the old fort just sort of slumped a little bit. A couple of the big spires cracked and fell sideways, throwing up more dust, and the sunset caught it all in this brilliant orange, and I sat there thinking that I'd just killed a man. Right then it didn't make any difference that he'd asked me to.

Then I snapped to. Whether he'd asked for it or not, if anybody found out I'd have a hard time explaining myself. I unwound the wires from the plunger terminals and clipped off the curled ends before stashing the plunger back in the shed and locking the door. The boys would take a hard look at everything tomorrow morning, but I'd just tell them that the dynamite had gone off. Wouldn't be the first time that had happened.

I caught myself thinking like a guilty man, and just for a second there I hated myself for what I'd done. But he'd wanted it, I told myself, and it was true, and besides I couldn't undo it. I thought of how Charlotte would get big with my baby, and I thought of the house I'd buy her with all that gold. And he'd wanted me to.

The sack was right where I'd left it, in a hollow at the bottom of a high five-pronged spire. Partway up the spire was a scooped-out spot where you

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could sit like you were in the palm of a stone giant. You could see a good way out over the plains from there, and if you turned around the mountains were something else.

## 7.

The spot we're sitting in right now, Jeff thought. Forty years ago Jarrett Bigelow hid a sack of gold here and killed a man and left him buried under sandstone and graded dirt and asphalt. How many thousand people drive over Vandoise Castleton every day and don't know he's there?

"That clacking sound," Bigelow said. "I don't think I'll ever forget that." After another long pause, he went on.

"The part I always liked about Skyler's story was the way he remembered all of Vandoise's quotes. 'As the poet says,' you know? I've walked around for forty years hearing old Vandoise saying that even though he never actually said it in front of me. And I wasn't there, but I can see that bone monster coming up out of the ground just as clear as I can see my own face in the mirror. I had to pass it on. And — " Bigelow's voice caught, and he swallowed. "I killed a man here, and I guess there's part of me that wanted to confess. Even though he asked me to, and even though I think I did the right thing. Every year fewer and fewer people know about the Blackfeet that died here, and every year I'd hear about this or that person I used to know who had died and I would think that I was the only person in the world who knew what happened to old Vandoise. I never told anybody."

Jeff and Cindy looked at each other. He just confessed to a murder, Jeff thought, and he could see Cindy thinking the same thing. Here we are in the middle of nowhere listening to the story of a murderer who is annoyed at us for trespassing on the scene of his crime. I bet he killed Skyler Vasquez, and I bet there never was any bone monster. He probably found some gold, or Vasquez found it, and they argued and Bigelow blew him up in the cave under the old fort. Jeff started to feel around near his feet for a rock, in case Bigelow made some kind of move.

Then, out of the blue, Cindy asked, "Did you marry Charlotte?"

Bigelow nodded. "We were married thirty-six years, until she died a year ago this October."

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"And you never told her?"

"No. We had four kids, and now seven grandkids, and I won't tell any of them either. I used that gold to take care of all of them. I bought land down south of Denver, I put my kids through college in Boulder. And I got a couple of accounts that no one's going to know about until after I'm gone. A little surprise for the grandkids." He cracked a wrinkled smile and stood, accompanied by sharp pops in his knees. "Well. Getting dark. Guess you two ought to get out of here, and stay on that side of the fence next time." He paused for a long time, looking at the sparse traffic on I-25.

"I think about them sometimes," Bigelow said then. "That old boy Vandoise and the monster down there. I wonder if they're really dead, either of them. Wonder if maybe they'll get out someday, and that bone monster'll start chasing the old man again. Seems almost like it ought to happen." He shook his head. "Other times I think I'm just making this whole story sound good, and I killed a man for a bag of gold."

There was a pause, and Jeff thought again of how far they were from anything. Then it passed, and he said, "Wish I'd seen that cave." He was full of imaginings about underground rivers, winding seams that led for miles under the parched prairie. Now it was all dynamited and buried under asphalt. If that story is true, he thought, some archaeologist in two thousand years is going to have one hell of a puzzle on his hands.

"Yeah," Bigelow said. "I wish you had too. I don't know whether you believe me or not," Bigelow went on, "but thank you for listening. Shit," he chuckled, "whether it's true or not, that's too good a story to let die with an old man like me."

"You can say that again," Cindy said.

"This is for hearing me out," Bigelow said, and he held out a hand palm-up. On the open palm rested two gold coins bearing the stamp PIKES PEAK GOLD and the date 1881. "When you two get old, you can be like me and old Vandoise, hanging around out here until some likely-looking kids come along, and then you can pass the story along. Then you give 'em these to make sure they remember."

"We would have remembered anyway," Cindy said.

"Still," Bigelow said, and they each took a coin, and Jeff thought *Now we are in it too*. This whole story, from the Blackfeet through dueling paleontologists through Vandoise and Sheets and Skyler and Jarrett

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Bigelow and Mister Drypto the bone monster. Now we're part of it too. Accomplices, perhaps...but no. It was old blood, long soaked into the ground. History, or ghosts. And I guess I was both right and wrong: some stories are buried under concrete out here. But they get out anyway, despite the weight of neglect and age and failing memory. And they are still close enough to touch.

Jarrett Bigelow touched the bill of his Colorado Rockies baseball cap and trudged through the sand and out of the old natural fort, leaving them in shadow with the faint gleam of gold and the brilliant darkening blue of evening sky.

## COMING ATTRACTIONS

DON'T BELIEVE THE RUMORS. It is indeed true that we have stories coming soon from Kit Reed, Joyce Carol Oates, James Sallis, Jack O'Connell, and Jack Cady. However, there is no truth to the claim that we plan to publish a special "All Mainstream Stories" issue.

Indeed, next month's will deliver plenty of the thrills and chills for which we all turn to fantastic fiction. For example: "Old Virginia" by Laird Barron presents us with an aging intelligence officer assigned to oversee Project Tallhat, a job that seems like nothing more than an overpaid babysitting job...but of course little is as it seems in this story.

We've also got "The Bone Witch" scheduled for next month, R. Garcia y Robertson's latest Markovy tale. This story includes some old-fashioned swashbuckling adventure, romantic first kisses, exotic lands, and oh yes, a protagonist who has mastered a spell of invisibility. Only the very greedy could ask for more from any one story.

Look for plenty of other great yarns in the following months, including fantasy, horror, science fiction, and some stories that just can't be classified...except as good reading. Subscribe now to make sure you won't miss any of the goodies in the months to come.

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# CURIOSITIES

## *FULLY DRESSED AND IN HIS RIGHT MIND*, BY MICHAEL FESSIER (1935)

"I WAS standing in front of the *Herald* and somebody fired a shot and I saw a fat man turn slowly on one heel and fall to the sidewalk."

With this economic attention-grabbing opener, Michael Fessier's first novel promises the kind of proto-noir pleasures which, while entertaining, are hardly unique amongst 1930s thrillers. Within a few pages, however, the reader discovers that the book is no conventional murder mystery but in fact a fantasy — albeit one which elegantly hedges its bets before its poignant conclusion acknowledges that at least one of its characters is something other than human.

Fessier (1907-1988), the dedicatee of Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, was a screenwriter and the author of *Clovis*, a 1948 novel about a super-intelligent parrot.

*Fully Dressed*'s 1935 printings are obscure enough that more than one bookdealer advertises the 1954 paperback as a first edition. Let us do them the kindness of assuming they are ill-informed rather than unscrupulous. Whatever edition you obtain, you're in for a treat. In exhilaratingly efficient prose — so lean and speedy that even a slowpoke like me can read the book in two hours — Fessier whips through his bizarre tale of a contemporary San Francisco penetrated by elements (and elementals) of the fantastic. His style is facile and fun but his gaze is unblinking and dyspeptic — there's a particularly disturbing scene involving the death of a child, for example — and this collision of moral stances, as much as the plot's cross-genre delights, makes this seventy-year-old novel feel considerably more modern and alive than much of the swollen pap that passes for contemporary fantastic literature.

— Peter Atkins

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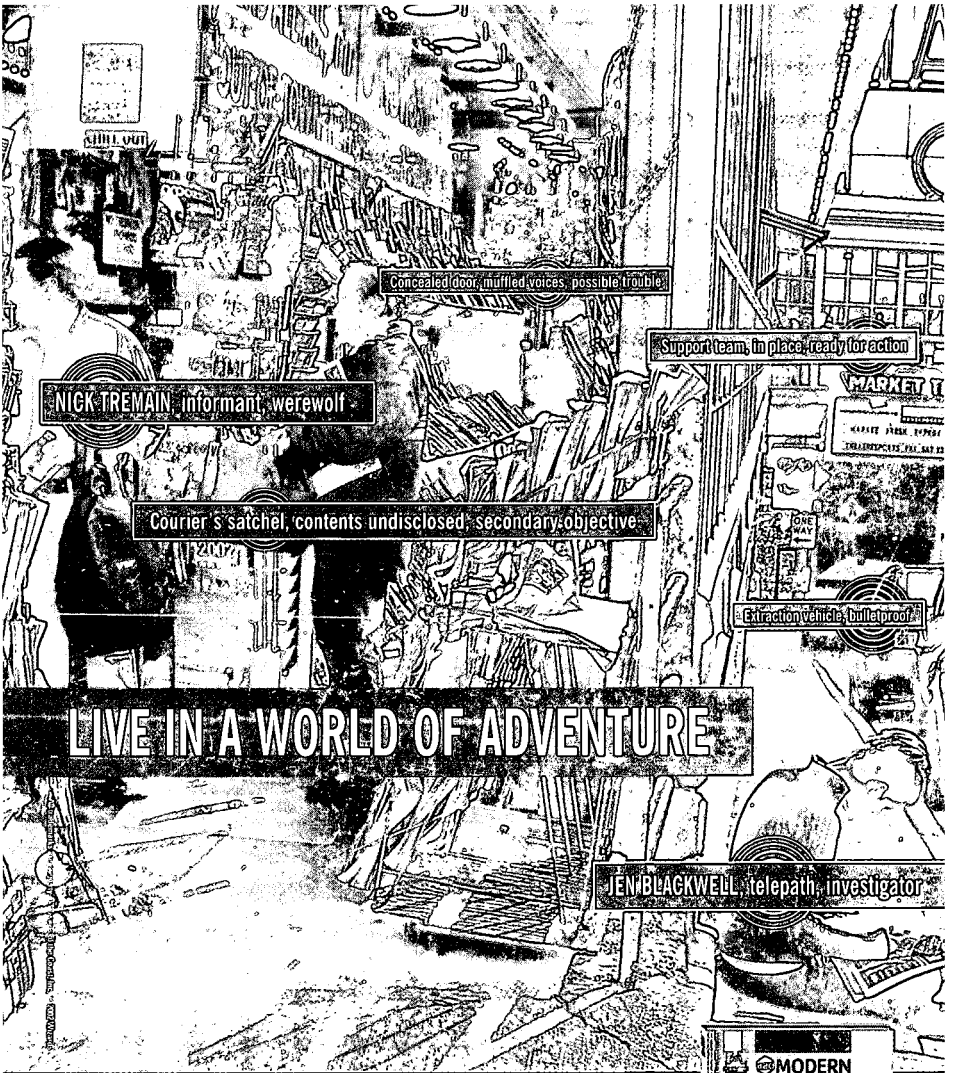
Concealed door, muffled voices, possible trouble
Support team, in place, ready for action
NICK TREMAIN, informant, werewolf
Courier's satchel, contents undisclosed, secondary objective
Extraction vehicle, bulletproof
LIVE IN A WORLD OF ADVENTURE
JEN BLACKWELL, telepath, investigator

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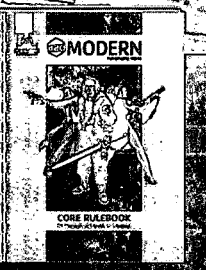


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